



NOVEL

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# THOUGH I AM AN INEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the **Butterfly-Rat**  
**Body Swap** in the Maiden Court





# Table of Contents

[Color Inserts](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Imperial Court Map and Relationship Chart](#)

[Cast](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Reirin Performs Surgery](#)

[Chapter 2: Keigetsu Hosts a Tea Party](#)

[Chapter 3: Reirin Cries](#)

[Chapter 4: Keigetsu Worries](#)

[Chapter 5: Reirin Trounces](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Story: A Smile and a Prophecy](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)















"Let's do this  
with a bang."

That was her  
catchphrase, and  
Unran had adopted  
it as his own motto.  
And yet, no matter  
how long she  
waited, he made no  
sound save for the  
occasional rattling  
breath.

"Isn't that what  
you said,  
Unran?"

Shu Keigetsu  
CONTAINS NOU REIRIN

Maiden of the  
Shu clan

Unran

Chief of a southern  
village







Kin Seika

Maiden of the  
Kin clan

Gen Kasui

Maiden of the  
Gen clan

Kou Reirin  
CONTAINS SHU KEGETSU

Maiden of the  
Kou clan

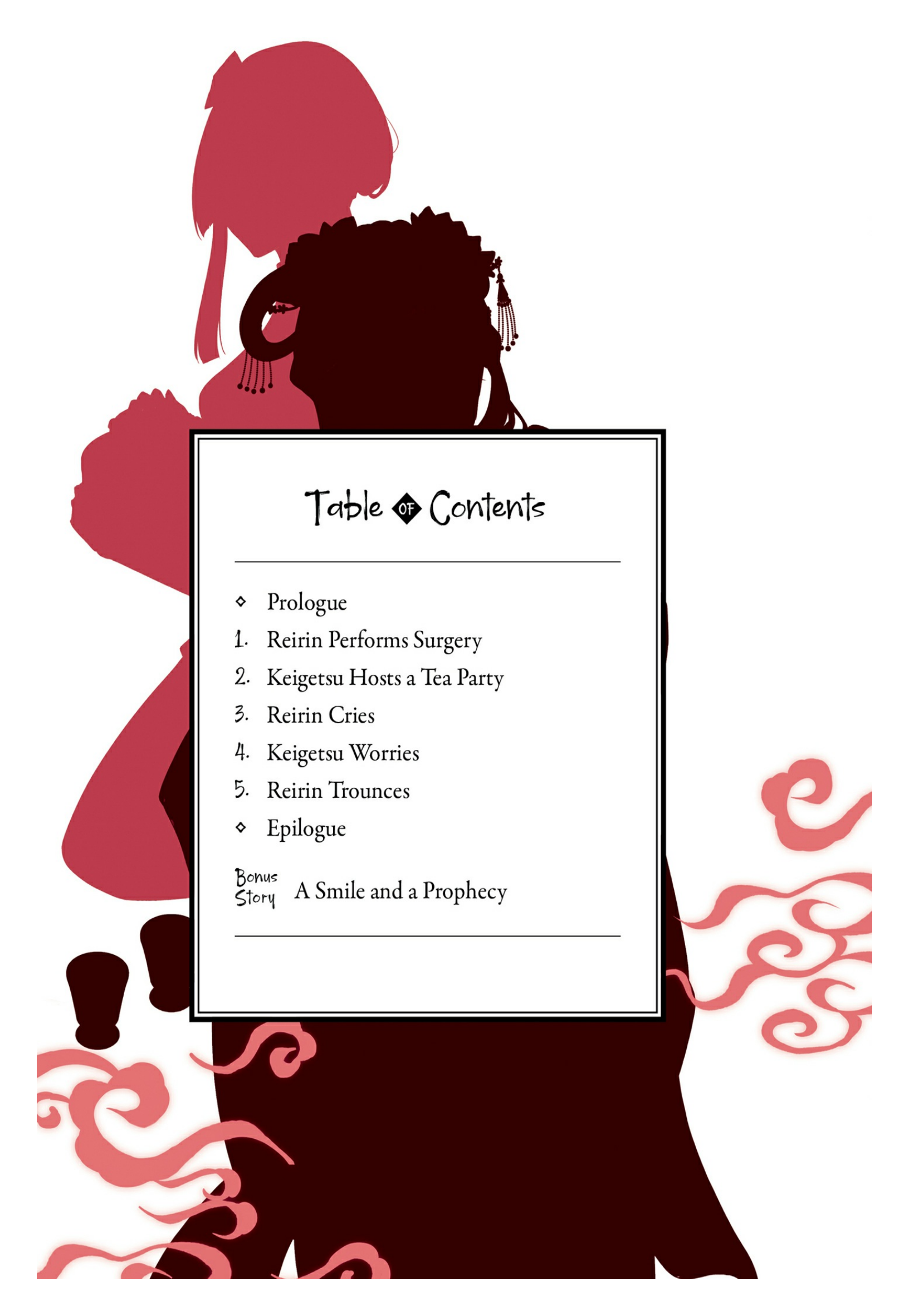
Ran  
Houshun

Maiden of the  
Ran clan

WHO WILL TAKE THE REINS OF THE MAIDENS' TEA PARTY?







## Table of Contents

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- ◇ Prologue
- 1. Reirin Performs Surgery
- 2. Keigetsu Hosts a Tea Party
- 3. Reirin Cries
- 4. Keigetsu Worries
- 5. Reirin Trounces
- ◇ Epilogue

Bonus  
Story A Smile and a Prophecy

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# THOUGH I AM AN UNEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat  
Body Swap in the Maiden Court



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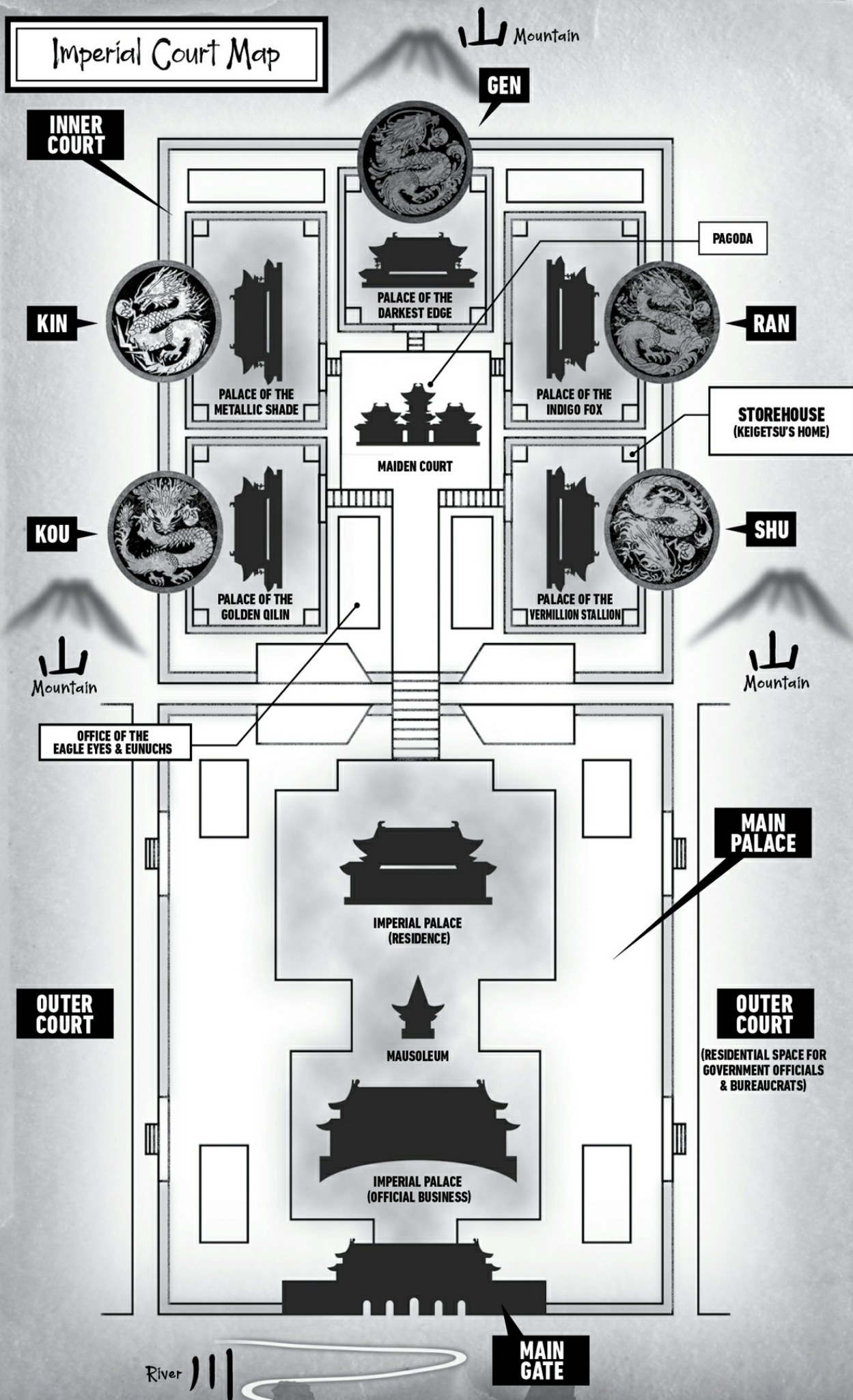


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# Imperial Court Map







# Relationship Chart

The clan that governs the lands to the west and rules over metal. Their signature season is autumn, signature direction is west, and signature color is white. Chops wood and collects water. Divided into two factions of pragmatic merchants and artists. Mainline descendants tend to be artsy types who prize aesthetic and philosophy. People who can make a profit from extolling beauty.

**KIN CLAN**  
(METAL / WEST / AUTUMN)



**GEN CLAN**  
(WATER / NORTH / WINTER)



The clan that governs the lands to the north and rules over water. Their signature season is winter, signature direction is north, and signature color is black. Dampens (suppresses) fire and nourishes (enhances) wood. Aloof and unfazed by carrying out the most inhumane of acts. On the other hand, can latch on hard to the right target. Many are proficient in the military arts.

**RAN CLAN**  
(WOOD / EAST / SPRING)



The clan that governs the lands to the east and rules over wood. Their signature season is spring, signature direction is east, and signature color is blue. Parts earth and feeds fire. Passive and mild mannered, the majority tend to be gentle scholars, but some have a scheming and sinister side to them.



**KOU CLAN**  
(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)

The clan that governs the central territory and rules over earth. Their signature season is the four cusps, signature direction is the center, and signature color is yellow. Obstructs water and bears metal. Straightforward, unpretentious, and full of natural-born caretakers. Mainline descendants tend to have a pioneering spirit and be as steadfast as the earth itself. People who can make it through the biggest of catastrophes with nothing but a "dearie me."



**SHU CLAN**  
(FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER)

The clan that governs the lands to the south and rules over fire. Their signature season is summer, signature direction is south, and signature color is red. Melts metal and produces earth. Full of intense personalities and show-offs. Prone to wild mood swings and value emotion over reason. People who hate and love with equal intensity.

**THE MAIDEN COURT**













Kou Reirin



The Kou Maiden. Beautiful and benevolent. Beloved by all, which has earned her the nickname of the prince's "butterfly." Frail and often sick.

Shu Keigetsu



The Shu Maiden. Has a freckled face and wears thick makeup. Reviled by all, which has earned her the nickname of the court "sewer rat." Used to be jealous of Reirin.

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Ei Gyomei



The crown prince.  
Reirin's cousin.

Shin-u



Captain of the Eagle Eyes,  
the enforcers of discipline  
in the inner court.

Leelee



A high-ranking court lady  
who serves Keigetsu.

Kou Tousetsu



Reirin's head court lady.

Kou Kenshuu



The empress.  
Reirin's aunt.

Kin Seika



The Kin Maiden.

Gen Kasui



The Gen Maiden.

Ran Houshun



The Ran Maiden.

Kou Keikou



Reirin's oldest brother.  
A Kou clan  
military officer.

Kou Keishou



Reirin's second older  
brother. A Kou clan  
military officer.

Unran



The chief of a southern  
village.

Ran Rinki



Houshun's older brother.  
The second son of the  
Ran clan.





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## Prologue

**I**DIOTS, the lot of them.

Ran Hourin—the woman known as the Virtuous Consort—sneaked a sneer in the shadow of her round fan. She sat in a recreation room hidden somewhere within the lavish Maiden Court, where a chessboard had been set out on a table.

“What now, Consort Ran? I’ve driven your general into a corner.”

“Goodness, Your Majesty, you’re such a bully. You leave me no choice but to surrender.”

Of course, neither her voice nor gaze betrayed a hint of the contempt hidden behind her fan. Between a face that was more cute than beautiful, her petite frame, and the dejected slump of her shoulders, the casual observer would take her for an ingenuous consort sulking over her loss. No doubt the “Hourin” everyone else saw was little more than a dainty woman, neither intelligent nor competitive. But that was fine by her.

Hourin was quite proud of her ability to project the image she wanted others to see.

Empress Kenshuu had proposed the match on a whim. The Noble Consort, so obsessed with playing up her sex appeal, and the Worthy Consort, who had left all her social skills in her mother’s womb, were nowhere to be seen, occupied with embroidery and a walk respectively. It boosted Hourin’s ego to think that the empress had made a point of challenging her over the others.

Unlike that attention-seeking Consort Kin, Hourin understood how vital it was for the women of the inner court to curry favor with Kenshuu. Hence, the outcome of the chess match made no difference to her. The important part was to humor the empress by throwing the match while keeping it close enough not to seem deliberate.

Frowning, she shifted her fan to the side and made a show of pouting. “And I was so close too.”

Innocent, ingenuous, and childish—she was an eternal maiden, the little sister figure among the prim and proper consorts. And Ran Hourin played that role with relish.

Much like a tree trunk shrouded in dense foliage, the clan of wood concealed their true natures behind a rich blanket of words that kept others from glimpsing what lay inside. They commanded the leaves on the trees by steering the wind that blew through its branches, toying with their surroundings without even lifting a finger.

*I couldn't care less if she thinks I'm a bit stupid. That's just what I'm letting her see.*

In fact, the more others took her for a lightweight, the better for her. How poetic would it be if the most helpless and innocent of the consorts had been pulling the strings the whole time, possessed of an overwhelming intellect?

*Oh, how strong the Ran blood flows within me!* Hourin gloated in her mind as she put away the chess pieces.

“The Maiden Court sure is quiet without the girls around. I hope they’re doing well,” said Kenshuu from where she was resting her elbow on her armrest and her chin in her palm, abruptly pulling Hourin from her thoughts.

“So do I. Are they on their way back now, I wonder?” she responded deliberately, doing her best to sound natural. “I’m a bit concerned about Lady Reirin’s health, but I’m sure she’ll perform her role as a Maiden without incident. She even offered Lady Keigetsu a helping hand with her hostess duties... What a truly admirable girl. Even a consort like me could stand to learn from her example.”

It was the instinct of the Ran clan—no, of *all* the women of the inner court—to ingratiate themselves to those in power.

Truth be told, her poor health notwithstanding, Kou Reirin was so perfect that not even Hourin—who tended to take a more scathing view of her own gender—could find fault with her. Reirin was beautiful and graceful in bearing. She was extremely gifted, yet still mild mannered and reserved. Though she had long since won the crown prince’s favor, she didn’t let that go to her head. How much of an honor...and how *easy* would it be to have a Maiden like that under

her wing?

Sadly, that wasn't the reality of the situation, so Hourin had no choice but to nitpick the girl's shortcomings—namely, her weak constitution—and do her best to fight with the card known as Ran Houshun.

"In contrast, my little Houshun is always so shy. I hope she's not making herself even smaller now that she's in an unfamiliar land..."

The statement was half modesty and half truth.

Ran Houshun had charming, youthful features much like Hourin's. Her petite frame tickled one's protective instincts, and she exuded an air of diffidence. With all her similarities to Hourin, one would think she'd also inherited the Ran clan's smarts, but it turned out the girl was nothing more than a cowardly weakling.

Houshun's calligraphy was decent and she was well versed in the scriptures, but there was no wit to her comebacks. She struggled to take the rough with the smooth, and teaching her about the dark side of the inner court only made her cower and weep. She didn't appreciate the pleasures of scheming, nor did she possess the intellect to deceive others.

She was a disappointment as a Maiden.

*Still, after all the effort I made to set the stage, even she will be sure to make her move.*

Pulling her fan toward her mouth in a graceful motion, Hourin smiled. Her charge's dim-wittedness posed a problem, but it could also translate to obedience. If Houshun didn't have the brains to think for herself, then Hourin just had to move her around atop the board. When it came down to it, the Maidens were nothing more than their consorts' pawns.

"Don't be like that. Ran Houshun is a wonderful Maiden. Your clan ought to be proud."

"I'm honored to hear that. Yes, I suppose she *is* a kind girl who can't bear to watch others suffer... As her guardian, I'd like to believe His Highness will come to appreciate her better qualities in time," Hourin responded demurely, helpless to stop a smile from spreading across her face.



It was a prophecy of sorts...or perhaps a warning. When Empress Kenshuu looked back on their conversation after all was said and done, she would no doubt be astonished to realize how accurately Hourin had predicted the future. But by that point, both she and Kou Reirin would have met their demise—along with the Palace of the Golden Qilin’s glory days. Kou Kenshuu, who had cut through the ranks via caregiving despite her dearth of feminine qualities, was doomed to be one-upped through identical methods.

*Serves her right.*

Hourin just barely swallowed the nasty laugh threatening to spill from her lips. Then she cast an idle glance at the other woman, whose chin was still pressed into her hand.

She was beautiful—that much Hourin had to admit. Still, the brazen woman exuded dignity over delicacy, and she intimidated more people than she enchanted. Even after spending a night on her deathbed, she continued to sit upon the empress’s throne with a look of utter nonchalance, not a flinch in her demeanor.

Back in their Maiden days, she had defied Hourin’s expectations and upended her carefully constructed plan to win the prince’s favor, rising to the top of the Maiden Court in a single leap.

*You think no one would dare to stand against you ever again, don’t you? You think you’re invincible.*

Idiots, the lot of them.

Hourin narrowed her large, girlish eyes into a glare for the briefest of moments.

*I’ll show you a thing or two.*

Kenshuu abruptly looked up, as if the other consort’s inner voice had reached her ears.

Hourin immediately averted her gaze, rearranging her face into a pout. “Oh, I hate to think I’m no match for you in either chess or raising a Maiden. I’ll be taking my leave for the day, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Ha ha. Sorry to be the one getting all the entertainment out of this, Virtuous Consort Ran,” said Kenshoo, permitting her to leave with a blithe laugh.

*Exactly. I was the one entertaining you. Only an idiot would get so full of herself.*

Despite the venom she was spewing on the inside, Hourin gave a polite bow before leaving the room.

By the time she headed down the cloister that led from the Maiden Court to the Palace of the Indigo Fox, her mood was back on the upswing. The more arrogant the empress was, the better. The more confident she was, the better. It was only a matter of time before she’d be gnashing her teeth in frustration instead.

What sort of fruit was the “plan” she’d shared with Houshun going to bear? Hourin couldn’t still the excited thump of her heart.

“The Virtuous Consort is something else,” one of Kenshoo’s elderly, long-serving gamboge golds said with an unimpressed sigh as she shuffled Hourin’s teacup out of the way. “Did she think we wouldn’t notice her snickering if she hid it behind her fan? She doesn’t have the slightest clue that you’re just indulging her obvious attempts at flattery or that you’re choosing to overlook her transgressions for the time being.”

“Heh heh. A person’s character really shines through in their chess game. She moves her pieces like she’s saying, ‘Here, I’ll let you win as part of my long con. Go ahead and move your piece here.’ It loops back around to being straightforward. It’s almost charming.”

“Oh, honestly! She clearly doesn’t realize you’re skilled enough to beat even His Majesty.” The gamboge gold scowled in displeasure, then lowered her voice and asked Kenshoo, “Was it truly wise to leave her be? You set up this match for a reason.”

“Hmm?” Kenshoo picked up her teacup before the court lady could put it away, guzzling down the rest of its contents.

The reason she’d challenged as unskilled a chess player as the Virtuous

Consort—though the woman in question seemed to fancy herself an expert—was because she’d heard word of her suspicious behavior. To be more specific, she’d found out that, as part of some plot, Hourin had sent one of her protégés to the embroidery unit that the Kin clan had tasked with sewing the ceremonial robes.

Kenshuu didn’t like gossip. She had no need for it when she could obtain precise and accurate intel from her “ears” around the inner court or main palace.

The Kin clan’s robe. The Ran clan protégé sent to the embroiderer. And...

“‘A kind girl who can’t bear to watch others suffer,’ was it?”

The words had been laden with meaning.

Kenshuu finished off her tea in the blink of an eye and let the teacup clatter to the table. “Eh, I’ll let sleeping dogs lie for now.”

“Please don’t be lazy, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not. The Virtuous Consort reminds me too much of a little squirrel, that’s all.”

The empress leaned back in her chair and tickled the air with her fingers. As her mistress began to pet an imaginary animal, the gamboge gold poured her another cup of tea with an exaggerated shake of her head. “Whatever could you find so charming about Consort Ran? Perhaps there was some appeal to her innocent face and mannerisms in the past, but not now that she’s in her forties. She’s under the delusion that she can spend her entire life a teenage Maiden.”

Kenshuu grinned. “That’s harsh. What makes a small animal lovable is not their age but whether they’re harmless or a pest. The sight of a squirrel stuffing its cheeks with too much food to get back into its den is endearing no matter how old it is.”

“Which of us is being ‘harsh’ here, exactly?” the gamboge gold said with a snort.

*Still...* Kenshuu dropped her gaze and traced the rim of her full cup of tea. A



*harmless squirrel can be cute even past its prime.*

Shoving her chin into her palm, she tapped the cup and swirled the liquid inside.

*But what to do about a pest?*

The ripples Kenshuu's finger made slowly spread across the pale surface of the water.

## Chapter 1:

### Reirin Performs Surgery

**N**EVER BEFORE had Reirin seen her life flicker through good and bad fortune at such a dizzying pace, like it was a leaf tossed about in the wind.

Just as she'd gotten fired up about her first official trip, her friend had been set up to fail. Once she'd struck back, she'd been forced to take advantage of a bandit attack to flee the scene. Despite the hostility she'd faced from her kidnappers, she'd managed to befriend the village chief's son, only for the entire population to fall victim to disease. The same villagers who had once smiled her way had thrown stones and hurled abuse at her. Yet as she steadfastly nursed them back to health, the villagers had finally come to trust her, their symptoms had slowly but surely subsided, and morning had graced the skies above. She had been so sure the light would gradually return to their world.

Now all of her budding hopes were dashed as the worst-case scenario unfolded before her eyes.

It was another morning of weak sunshine in the village. Upon catching a glimpse of the man who had slumped over on the spot—Unran—Reirin screamed, “Unran?! Unran!” She clutched his shoulders, but he didn't so much as twitch.

There was a dagger wedged deep in the unconscious man's gut. The moment Reirin instinctively reached out to touch it, a man's calm voice rang in her ears. “Wait. Don't touch it.”

It was her older brother and bodyguard, Kou Keikou. Wearing a grim look behind the cloth tied around his face, he gently laid Unran's body down and performed a quick inspection. “This is bad.”

“It must have been Lord Koh's doing,” said Reirin as she settled back down beside her brother, her face white as a sheet. “Unran told me he was going to pick herbs in the mountains last night, but I'm sure his real intention was to

meet up with Lord Koh's envoy. He tried to negotiate with that man to get us a better selection of herbs..."

*"Hell, maybe I'll be able to bring back something even better."*

She recalled the sound of his voice, filled with confidence and a hint of guile. Given how conscientious he was, he'd probably made his own effort to salvage the situation, reluctant to leave Reirin to solve the dysentery problem all by herself.

"And then...he was struck down..."

How had Unran approached Lord Koh? Had he begged for his aid? No, his personality made that unlikely. He must have threatened the man. Perhaps he'd used the magistrate's order to punish Shu Keigetsu as blackmail, or else described the horrors of the sickness.

But all that had done was convince Lord Koh of the need to silence Unran, so he'd stabbed him. No, worse—he'd insinuated that he would dispose of the entire village. Hence why Unran had dragged himself all the way home in critical condition just to tell them to run.

The warning he'd delivered at the cost of his own life force played back in Reirin's head enough times to leave her dizzy.

"Why didn't I stop him...?"

He met with the envoy once every two days. She'd been too convinced of that to catch on to his reckless plan.

*"Let's do this with a bang, right?"*

As a consequence, the man with the mischievous smile had come back with a face as pale as ash. All because Reirin hadn't stopped him.

"Save blaming yourself for later," came the even voice of Keikou, who had been inspecting Unran's wound with a grave stare. He slowly rose to his feet and looked at Reirin and Shin-u in turn. "Let's get our timeline straight. I noticed I hadn't seen Unran around since last night. I take it that's because he was meeting up with Lord Koh's envoy, then? He tried blackmailing the magistrate with the punishment deal to get us more medicinal herbs, only to get stabbed



for his trouble. But he managed to make it back to the village alive.”

Reirin nodded, still pale. “Yes. I think so...”

“Why did he say everyone should run?” Shin-u wondered aloud beside her.

“He was probably warning us about a cover-up operation,” Keikou answered. “It’s not enough for Lord Koh and his cronies to take out the man threatening them—they’re out to ‘silence’ the entire village. If they found out about the disease, they might be planning to use that as an excuse to burn the whole place down.” He pulled off his face mask, looking back in the direction of the pond. “Or maybe this whole plague was a setup to reach that outcome.”

Over at the shrine in the pond, there swayed a vermillion sash opulent enough to look out of place.

“I don’t know how much of this was planned,” Shin-u said calmly, his arms folded, “but even if Lord Koh wants to use the disease as an excuse to incinerate the village, he can’t go ahead with it until he’s conducted an investigation. It would be too blatantly inhumane.”

“You’d be right if there weren’t dignitaries like His Highness and the Maidens staying in the township right now. I bet he could speed up the process in the name of keeping them safe.” Soon after describing the worst-case scenario, Keikou lightened the mood with a shrug of his shoulders. “Still, we’ve got the wise Prince Gyoumei on our side. I’m sure he’ll stall for time by saying he won’t permit a purge before an advance team confirms the situation, or something like that.”

He dropped his gaze to where Unran lay on the ground.

“For the moment, we need to focus on the man who risked his life to warn us about this. His wound is pretty deep.”

Keikou’s face was almost never seen without a cheerful smile, but for once, it was contorted in distress. And who could blame him? Red blood dripped from Unran’s wound despite the dagger sealing it closed, and glimpses of the color inside suggested that the damage had reached his internal organs. He was so pale that it was a wonder he had been on his feet until just moments ago, and his breathing was shallow and erratic. His body had clearly reached its limits

some time ago. He was frozen in an unnatural pose, his hand still clutching his stomach.

“I’ll go fetch some fresh water,” Shin-u proposed after a long silence. “From the looks of it, he’ll die of blood loss as soon as we pull the dagger free. I don’t know how this village does things, but I’m sure they at least observe the practice of moistening the lips of the deceased.”

His expression was as deadpan as ever, but he sounded well meaning. Looking at the situation objectively, Unran was as good as dead. Thus, Shin-u didn’t see preparing for his funeral as a callous act of abandonment; it was nothing more than a levelheaded judgment and even a show of goodwill.

“I’ll ask where the cemetery is, while I’m at it. The least we can do is dig him a grave.”

“Wait,” came a strained voice. It belonged to the Maiden of the Shu clan—no, Kou Reirin—whose face was taut with tension. “Unran isn’t dead yet. Let me administer treatment.”

“Think about it rationally,” Shin-u admonished the girl, oblivious to the pity in his own eyes as he looked down at her. “How are you going to heal a wound like this? He’s not a clay doll. You can’t stuff mud in the cracks and make him good as new. Giving him medicine will only prolong his suffering.”

“I’ll stitch him up,” she declared. “I’ll compress his arteries to stop the bleeding and suture the wound.”

“You’ll what?”

Ignoring Shin-u as he fell into a dismayed silence, the Maiden rose to her feet. “Bro—Lord Kou Keikou.” She gazed straight into the eyes of the man at least a head taller than she was. “I’m sure you know how we can save his life. Please instruct me. I’ve heard tales of your exploits on a countless number of battlefields—that you’ve put the guts of eviscerated soldiers back in their bodies and sewn the wounds shut with a needle and thread. Is that true?”

Keikou nodded without hesitation. “You heard right.”

Shin-u looked back at him, shocked. “Sewing the flesh together to escape death? Have you lost your mind? That’s an act of blasphemy against the god of

mortality. You don't even come from a line of doctors!"

"So what?" Keikou didn't flinch in the face of the conventional moral values of the Kingdom of Ei. "It's true that what I do is considered unusual in this kingdom, and I don't have the authority or study to back it up. It's been a series of do-or-die gambles. But there have been countless men I wanted to save badly enough to take the risk. What else was I supposed to do?" He gave a flippant shrug of his shoulders.

Shin-u stared back at him unblinkingly. Once Keikou accepted someone into his inner circle, he'd do anything to protect them. That simplistic yet bold Kou stance was incomprehensible to a member of the Gen clan, who held no interest in anyone but the sole object of their obsession.

He began to protest. "But—"











“No ifs, ands, or buts. If you’re going to preach to me about duty and logic, then let me ask you this: What gives *you* the right to stop us as neither the patient nor his family? Unran’s the only one who gets to refuse the treatment.” Keikou cut him off, a sharp glint in his eyes. “It’s too late. We’ve already let this man into our inner circle.”

There was no need to spell out who “we” referred to: It was Kou Keikou and Kou Reirin. The affectionate, valiant Kou siblings were dead set on protecting both Unran and his entire village.

“Well then. While I have no objections whatsoever to sealing up Unran’s wound, my procedures are all self-taught, not to mention what a nasty injury we’ve got on our hands. It’s not going to be a pretty sight. To be more specific, we’ll have to press a hot iron to the laceration, shove our hands into his guts, and sew the flesh together.”

It sounded less like a medical procedure and more like torture.

Keikou turned back to his sister, who was wearing another girl’s face, and gave her a searching look. “I’ll take whatever assistance I can get, but it’ll make extra work for me if you faint. Can I trust you to keep it together during the operation?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t be serious, Lord Keikou,” Shin-u cut in as the Kou siblings moved the conversation along without him, making a rare show of raising his voice a fraction. “You’d subject a woman to such a gory task?”

“Now, now. I can’t have you underestimating her fortitude.”

“This isn’t a question of fortitude. Bloodshed and combat are a military officer’s domain. You shouldn’t ask a Maiden to handle blood.”

This was Shin-u’s moral code as well as his sense of justice. The soft-skinned creatures known as women were meant to be protected in the arms of a man.

Yet the girl who was nobler and more sheltered than anyone reached out to touch his arm, pushing him out of her path. “You’re wrong, Captain.”

Though gentle, her voice was as dignified as could be. She looked straight

through Shin-u with her gorgeous, crystal-clear eyes.

“From the moment we’re born into this world, we women are destined to shed blood and fight.” Her slender fingers formed the motion of holding a needle. A faint smile flashing across her face, she added, “In hindsight, perhaps the Great Ancestor made embroidery a woman’s virtue so we could one day stitch together our loved ones’ wounds.”

The first step was to find a place to perform the operation. As soon as the Maiden rushed off to do just that, Shin-u turned on his heel.

“Where are you going, Captain? Off to sulk somewhere?” Keikou asked from where he was kneeling beside Unran.

“I’m not that childish. I know full well she won’t listen to anyone when she gets like that,” said Shin-u, casting him a frosty glance. “I’m going back to the township. Someone needs to inform them the epidemic is under control and stop them from burning the village. I’m sure Lord Koh has fed His Highness nothing but lies. I should head back and let him know about the magistrate orchestrating the abduction, the gold we found, and our suspicions about the robe.”

Shin-u made to leave, only to stop short upon hearing what Keikou said next.

“Uh, about that... I do admire your dedication to your job, Captain, but I’ve already informed him about everything except for the sick gown.”

“What?” the captain asked with a dubious frown.

Keikou grunted as he looped his arms under Unran’s underarms and knees and lifted him off the ground. “The truth is, His Highness already knows that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ made it to this village, that you joined up with us, and that Lord Koh was stashing gold in the forest.”

“How?”

“I used a dove,” said the man often teased for being more like a beast than a human, his lips curling into a grin. “I’ve always been good at communicating with animals. I trained a dove to be my messenger, and it hasn’t been long since



I last sent the little guy off with a message. I've made sure His Highness knows there was a dysentery outbreak but also that we have it under control."

A pause. "Why didn't you tell me?" Shin-u asked in a deep, threatening voice.

"I'm a solitary man who loves his secrets. I tend to keep my cards close to my chest," Keikou responded lightly. "But I came clean eventually, didn't I? Cut me some slack."

An ineffable haze settled over Shin-u's heart as he learned that his half brother had been aware of his every move. No, worse—he'd been dancing in the palms of these men's hands.

But a beat later, he swallowed down his displeasure, realizing his reaction made little sense. If the facts had been relayed to Gyoumei without his knowledge, he ought to be pleased with the speed of the arrangements. He hadn't done a single thing he should be ashamed for the prince to know. He'd made the unilateral decision to stay behind because it was the most logical course of action.

*"Take me as your wife?"*

Shin-u recalled the sight of the Maiden staring back at him in challenge, illuminated by the flickering light of the flame. He scowled to banish both the image of her slender fingers on his cheek and the inviting touch of her hand from his mind.

"Fine. I don't care."

"Glad to hear it." Keikou gave an unapologetic nod and walked off, taking care not to jostle Unran in his arms. Upon striding past Shin-u, he beckoned his brooding companion with a jerk of his chin. "Now that you don't have anywhere better to be, Captain, might I ask you to keep an eye on you-know-who and drag her away if she loses her cool during the procedure?" His mouth forming a small grimace, he added, "She's the type to keep smiling on her own deathbed, but I'm pretty sure this is the first time she's seen another person get hurt. The latter scenario hits a Kou harder."

His rueful smile was brimming with brotherly concern.

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The next half hour or so was a hectic time for the trio. First, they cleaned an abandoned warehouse to the best of their ability—the same one where Reirin had stayed for a time—and laid out a blanket, after which Keikou and Shin-u carefully carried Unran inside. Next came stocking up on all the hot water and clean blankets they could get. They ripped up the classy robe “Shu Keigetsu” had been wearing during her abduction to secure a silk thread, then sterilized it in boiling water along with a borrowed needle. In addition, they procured a brazier and iron from Gouryuu and heated those well. Once they’d stuffed a gag into Unran’s mouth to keep him from struggling and the surgeon had scrubbed herself clean, the preparations as dictated by Keikou were complete.

“This looks more like the preparations for a torture session than an operation,” Shin-u muttered as he eyed the red-hot iron, his arms crossed and his back to the wall.

“Jeez, the Gen clan always has violence on the brain...or so I’d like to say, but yeah, it’s probably going to hurt about the same,” Keikou replied with a shrug, his mask tied back around his face. “If we had opium or henbane root, we could numb him to the pain... But Unran doesn’t have the strength to swallow either of those at the moment, and *we’d* pass out if we smoked them for him to inhale. We don’t have an incense burner either.”

After a moment’s thought, Reirin asked, “How about this, then?” She took a small piece of cotton wrapped in bamboo skin from the breast of her garment.

“What is that?”

“A piece of cotton soaked in the juices of aconite, datura, and nightshade root and left out to dry. Soaking it in warm water and inserting it into one of his nostrils will slowly intoxicate him to the point of forgetting the pain.”

The plants she had named were all known for being deadly poisons. Shin-u pushed himself from the wall in surprise.

Keikou, meanwhile, seemed to have bigger concerns than her suggestion to give poison to a dying, wounded man. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at his sister. “When did you make this?”

“I found the plants growing in the Cursed Forest. It’s a habit of mine to process whatever aconite I come across. You needn’t worry about the side

effects—I've curbed them as much as possible so it can be taken even in times of extreme sickness."

"A 'habit,' huh?" Keikou parroted back in a deep voice.

He must have realized what this implied: Reirin had been tempted to rely on such drugs in moments of excruciating pain. That spoke to how close she was to reaching her physical limits.

"Let's discuss this later."

"Yes. Later."

The pair quietly cut their conversation short. Reirin thanked Keikou for his consideration, then knelt next to Unran's prone form. For now, she had to focus on the operation. She stuck the cotton up Unran's nose, then carefully cleaned the skin around his wound while paying close attention to his breathing.

Keikou knelt down beside her. "First, we stop the bleeding. Based on the hue and speed of the blood flow, I doubt any of his major arteries have been ruptured. It's a miracle. Ready? I'm going to pull the blade out of him."

"Yes."

He tugged the dagger free, a torrent of blood gushing from the wound in its wake. Reirin couldn't help but flinch as the red sludge soaked the blankets and straw in the blink of an eye. It was as if his very life were seeping out from inside him.

*No. I won't allow that to happen,* Reirin immediately told herself, drawing her lips into a thin line.

She'd never seen a wound this deep before, but so what? All she had to do was stop the bleeding and stitch the torn flesh back together. No matter the cost, she would be sure to sew this young man's soul to its vessel.

"This one here is the largest blood vessel. Use the thread to tie off both ends. The rest we can cauterize."

"All right."

The pair did exactly as they'd discussed beforehand in what could almost be described as an impassive manner. Reirin tied off the thickest blood vessel with

the silk thread to stop the bleeding, then pressed the hot iron to the smaller ones. In this particular situation, it was a stroke of luck that Unran had already blacked out.

For a while, the warehouse was filled with nothing but the quiet hiss of coal in the brazier and the snip of scissors and thread.

“We’ve stopped the bleeding. Next comes stitching the torn viscera. After that, we press the flesh together and sew the skin shut.”

If Reirin said, “I’m not sure I can do this,” her brother would’ve taken over for her without a hint of disdain. Behind her, she could sense Shin-u preparing to escort her out at the slightest sign of trouble.

Instead, she exhaled a slow breath and lifted her face. “Understood.” She picked up the needle, which had been sterilized in boiling water and flame and then threaded with a string of silk. “I can do that.”

*I’m going to see this through,* she thought to herself.

She was going to save Unran’s life. She was going to keep her promise to him too.

*“I swear to protect you no matter what.”*

She’d assured him as much in the Cursed Forest, and she couldn’t go back on her word. Not ever.

With a brazier burning in the narrow space, the heat in the warehouse was stifling on such a humid summer morning. Reirin moved her needle with a single-minded determination, paying no heed to the passage of time or the sweat trickling down her forehead. Each time a bead of perspiration dripped onto Unran’s body, Keikou reached out to wipe him clean from the side.

Her head began to hurt the longer she strained her mind, as if it were a taut thread she kept pulling and pulling. It felt like a ball of pain was rattling around inside her skull. Countless times, Unran’s face and voice flitted in and out of her mind as if in hot pursuit.

*“You know something?”*

The first image to come into focus was the dazed look in his eyes as the



villagers had flocked to the boars. Although he'd shrugged off the mercenary way they showered him with smiles as soon as he brought home food, he'd still watched them in warm silence.

*"I think this is what he wanted to see,"* Unran had murmured, a faint half smile on his lips. He spoke the word "he" in the bittersweet voice of someone earnestly seeking forgiveness. *"He was so calm and collected most of the time. The truth is, even I had to wonder what possessed him to venture into the Cursed Forest. But I think he just wanted to see everyone happy... To help them."*

Then, in the tiny voice of someone too embarrassed to be heard, he'd added, *"I get it now."*

Reirin remembered when she'd stood on her toes to hang the meat from the eaves to dry. Unran had reached out to pat her on the head, only to screw his face into a scowl and snatch both the boar and string from her hands, huffing, *"This is no job for a Maiden."* It had been a show of concern, to be sure, but perhaps it had doubled as an effort to hide his embarrassment.

Underneath his facade of sarcasm and scorn, Unran possessed a warm, innocent heart. How much must it have hurt when the other villagers showered him in stones and insults?

Still, it hadn't taken him long to get his chin up. Reirin wanted nothing more than to show him how the villagers' attitudes had changed since then.

*Please, Unran, I beg of you. Don't leave us,* she silently called out to the man, who didn't so much as flinch as she worked her needle. *Gouryuu said you were his brother's son. He thinks you're incredible. The woman who yelled at you and the boy who threw that rock both apologized to me in tears. Your feelings have reached everyone loud and clear.*

Unran still didn't know how horrible the villagers felt for what they'd done to him. How grateful they were to him. How worried they were for him.

*I won't let you go anywhere before you find out.*

Her teeth ground together with a gravelly crunch.

She stitched his warm insides back together. His well-toned flesh too. And, for the finishing touch, she took great care to sew the torn skin shut.

“I’m done,” said Reirin, setting her needle down. Though she’d only moved her fingers, she was as tense and breathless as if she’d just finished a strenuous dance.

“Excellent work. You’re better at this than me,” Keikou said with a slow nod, carefully inspecting the wound. “The next time my stomach gets ripped open, I ought to have you sew it up for me. I’ll have some colored threads ready to go so you can really dress it up.”

His banter encouraged Reirin to relax. “Goodness,” she said, smiling through her tears. “I’ll be sure to embroider you a nice flower when the time comes.”

Unran’s wound had been closed, but it remained to be seen whether he would regain consciousness. He wouldn’t be able to drink much water for a while. Could he survive the day without losing all his fluids or succumbing to the heat? Everything hinged on his resilience.

“For now, we’d better air the place out. We’re in danger of passing out otherwise. Let’s step outside for a breath of fresh air while we’re at it.”

“Certainly.”

The pair left Shin-u to watch over Unran, opened the door wide, and exited the warehouse.

Once they’d carefully washed their hands with the tub of drawn water resting in the shade of a tree, Keikou cut right to the chase. “Now then, Reirin.” His hushed tone indicated that this was a private conversation. “Do you understand what I was asking you earlier?”

“It’s a talisman of sorts.”

She didn’t specify what “it” was, but they both knew exactly what she was referring to: the anesthetic poison she had just given to Unran.

Washing the ladle clean of blood, Reirin calmly went on, “I don’t use it all that often. My body stopped feeling the pain a long time ago.”

As she said that, it occurred to her that perhaps “stopped” wasn’t the right word. Her body was in constant agony—her mind had just learned to ignore it. She’d relinquished that sensation along with the rest of her negative emotions.

Yet that had slowly begun to change as a result of her switch with Keigetsu. Her emotions had learned to waver, and she remembered what pain felt like. The thought of what else lay beyond that precious transformation of hers... frightened her a little.

Nevertheless, she wasn't indulging in poisons to relieve her pain. Not yet.

Reirin curled her lips into her usual smile as slowly as she could. "Fret not, Brother Senior. I'm doing just fine."

Keikou heaved a short sigh, then grabbed Reirin by the arm and commanded, "Dip the ladle in the tub."

The moment it was submerged, the ladle she held in her slender fingers drew a complex tangle of patterns on the water's surface.

Why? Because her hands were shaking.

"Reirin. If you were actually 'fine,' you wouldn't be shaking like a leaf or hiding behind a smile. Don't pull that fine-tuned mask on me."

"You misunderstand! I—"

"Listen. You can't blame yourself for this." Her brother's usual exuberant smile was nowhere to be found; his gaze as he peered into her eyes was sharp enough to reach the inner depths of her heart. "If you're upset with yourself for letting Lord Koh stab Unran, then understand I'm just as guilty. I didn't stop it from happening either. I never imagined that Unran would show so much backbone."

When he muttered, "I wonder what inspired the change of heart," Reirin could have sworn she stopped breathing for a moment.

Keikou persisted in the face of her silence. "I have to admit, I'm impressed. Unran's a great man. He risked his own life to protect his village. He was hiding the qualities of a ruler all this time, and I admire him for that. So you shouldn't fret over him—you should be proud." His voice rang out strong and clear.

Reirin's hands abruptly stopped trembling.

"Reirin?" her brother prompted with a tilt of his head.

"Oh, it's nothing." She gave a slow blink before a smile rose to her face once

more. “You always know just what to say, Brother Senior. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Hey...”

“Now then, I’d best put all the surgical tools away. Please get some rest, Brother. You haven’t slept a wink, have you?”

Reirin briskly rose to her feet and turned back to the warehouse before Keikou could get in a response. She couldn’t allow him to get a good look at her face.

When she took over watch duty from Shin-u, she asked him to force her overworked brother to take a nap, claiming Keikou wouldn’t listen if it came from her. She watched as the guard left without a trace of suspicion, then went about tidying up the blood-soaked blankets and needle.

Upon hearing a small whimper amid the process, she whipped around in a fluster. Unfortunately, it didn’t appear Unran had regained consciousness. After a few dragged-out moans escaped his lips, he fell back into a deep sleep.

Reirin watched him in silence, wiping the sweat from his forehead. His complexion was still terribly pale. His lips were chapped, and he made a weak wheezing sound each time he breathed through a mouth left agape. The stench of blood permeated the warehouse. His body grew heavier with every gasp for air. She could almost feel his raw, agonizing pain—and the presence of death looming close enough to touch.

““Be proud of him as a ruler.””

Eventually, Reirin dropped the damp hand towel back onto the tray. She picked up the bloody needle and tightened her fingers around it.

An unnatural sense of calm settled over her, the surrounding sounds growing distant to her ears. She went to a silent world devoid of anger, sadness, or distress. Perhaps this world had been her home not so long ago.

“You did well, Unran.” Reirin stroked his hair with her free hand as he gave the occasional moan. “You acted in a manner befitting a ruler. You lived up to your name.”



Keikou had been surprised to see Unran show so much courage—to discover him a man worthy of succeeding the chief. But Reirin knew the truth. He'd done it because of the promise he made with her.

*"I swear to protect you no matter what, so you must protect this village as its ruler."*

She stopped brushing his hair.

"I coerced you into playing the ruler."

Her hands were no longer shaking.

Her hands were past the point of shaking.

A black haze of emotion congealed no sooner than it had welled up inside her, weighing her down as it saturated her whole being, stopping her heart from so much as trembling. All she could feel was the dark, heavy sensation of sinking down and down into the floor.

"I..."

Keikou was equally guilty of failing to stop Unran's reckless plan. Perhaps that was true. But *Reirin* was the one who had inspired him to such recklessness in the first place. She had imposed her own values on him and encouraged him to get back on his feet. She had unearthed his dormant regality and dragged it to the surface.

If he had waited for help after he was stabbed rather than crossing the mountain, he at least wouldn't have aggravated his wound.

"I drove you to your death."

Those words crept into the depths of her heart—nay, her soul—and pressed their sharpened blade to its most tender and guarded part.

Someone was going to die because of her. That was Reirin's single and greatest fear.

Reirin realized then that she was looking at the floor. *I must...I must keep my gaze forward.*

She had sworn that to herself. If she'd gained her life at the cost of someone

else's, she had to enjoy it to the fullest. Do things with a bang. Smile. Throw her chest out and lift her head high...

“ ... ”

Yet no matter how hard she tried to lift them, her chin and her gaze only sank lower and lower, as if caught in the mud.

There came a tiny pop as she clenched her fists. It was the sound of a needle—one that had been held over a fire too many times and worked past its limits—snapping in two.

## Chapter 2:

### Keigetsu Hosts a Tea Party

**K**EIGETSU WATCHED IN A DAZE as Ran Houshun skittered off like a small animal. All the things she'd said swirled around and around in Keigetsu's head.

*"Lady Keigetsu loves dignified gentlemen, apparently."*

*"She said she might slip them an aphrodisiac."*

*"I even caught her casting lascivious glances at the ceremonial officers."*

"Lady Keigetsu," Leelee prompted in a hushed voice, looking concerned.

The Maiden snapped back to her senses, then broke into a cold sweat as she noted Keishou's conflicted silence.

*I have to explain myself!*

The first thing she felt was fear. She'd made a terrible enough impression on the Kous as it stood. Over the past few days, her relationship with Keishou had improved to the point that he was offering her words of comfort, but Houshun's accusations had no doubt thrown whatever progress she'd made out the window.

*"I-It's not true..."*

Even she couldn't bear to listen to the pathetic crack of her voice. She'd *meant* to sound more coherent and composed—indeed, much like Kou Reirin herself—but the words came out in a squeak despite her best efforts. She hated how the mere sound of her voice was all it took to make her look suspicious.

*"It was all lies. The little snake made it all up!"*

*Uh-oh.* She'd slipped and called Houshun a name.

A tremulous, emotional plea of "She was lying! I didn't do anything wrong!" was as good as a confession of guilt. Not to mention that it was the word of the virtuous, harmless Ran Houshun against the malevolent sewer rat Shu Keigetsu. There was no question which of the two he would believe.

“I swear I wasn’t lust—”

“Hm?” Keishou gaped at her with an incredulous expression. “I didn’t believe that for a second.”

Keigetsu was shocked. Wasn’t *she* the one who ought to be skeptical of *his* response?

“Hold on... Did you really think I’d take Lady Houshun’s word that you’re a harlot?”

“H-harlot?!” His blunt choice of words made Keigetsu choke up for a very different reason than before. “Y-you could’ve picked another way to put it!”

“See? You’re so easily flustered. You seem like a fool for love, and I can tell you appreciate a handsome face, but you’re rather innocent. Or perhaps ‘easy’ is the word for it?”

How many insults did the man have to string together in one sentence?

“I’m not *easy*!” Keigetsu screeched before she could stop herself.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Keishou with an amused quirk of his brow. “Watch this.”

He took a step toward her. The moment she drew back on reflex, startled, he reached out to catch her chin in his hand.

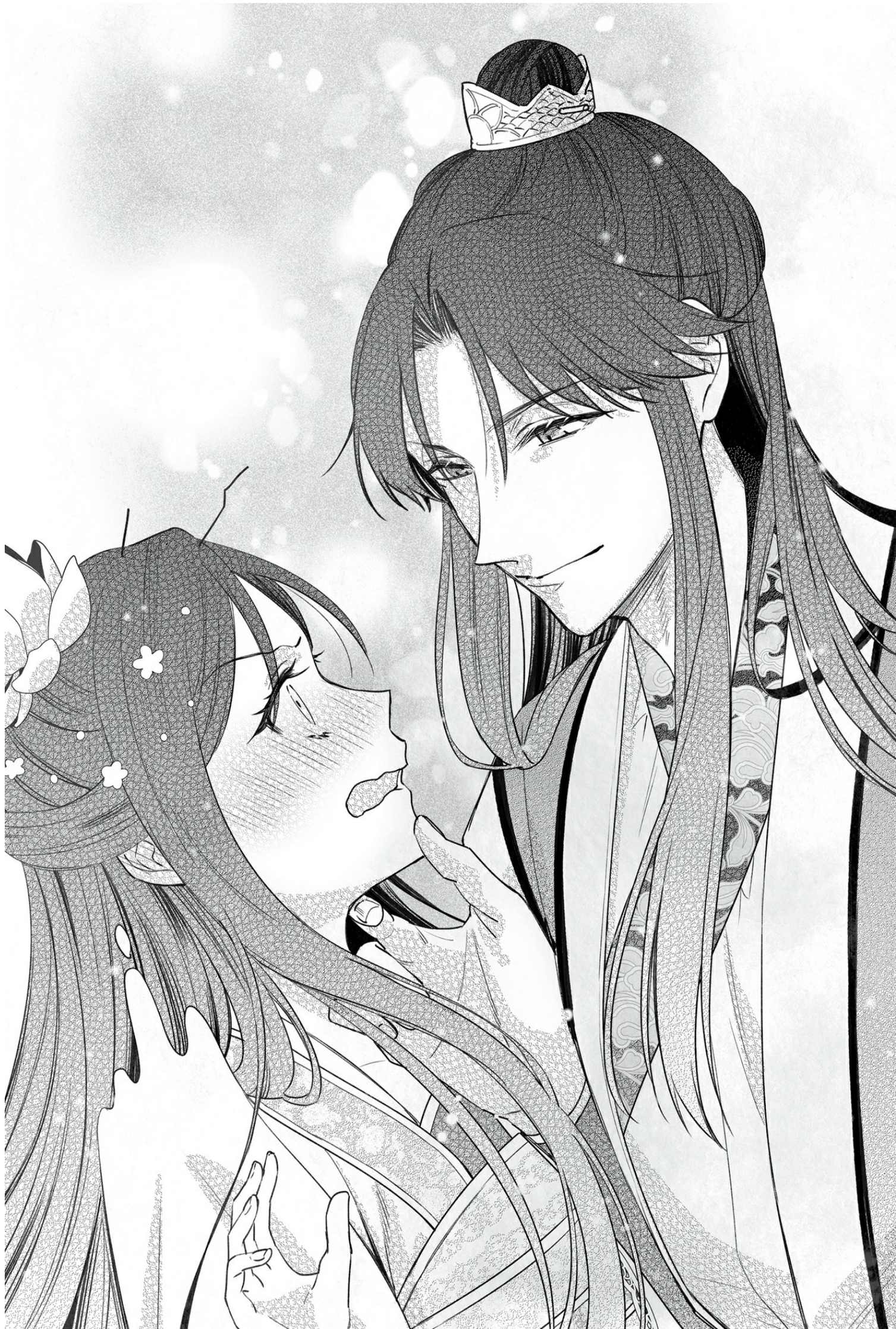
“This is all it takes to make you blush to the tips of your ears.”

“Eep!”











Her heart hammered so hard, she thought it might leap out of her throat. The teasing look on his clear-cut features, combined with the touch of his surprisingly strong fingers, hit Keigetsu like a ton of bricks, leaving her reeling.

“L-L-Let m-me...”

“Let me-me?”

Keigetsu almost rallied enough to shove him back, but Keishou burst into laughter and let go a second before she could.

Then he turned to Leelee with a shrug. “Can you imagine a girl like this slipping anyone an aphrodisiac? Supposing she took an interest in someone, the most she could manage is sketching hearts in the corner of her scrolls and sneaking peeks at him from afar.”

“I don’t disagree, but Lady Keigetsu isn’t a toy...theoretically. I think you’ve played with her quite enough.”

“Excuse me, Leelee?! Are you supposed to be defending me or putting me down?! What’s ‘theoretically’ supposed to mean?! You could try a little harder to contradict him! I’ve never sketched hearts in my life!”

Keigetsu most certainly wasn’t that childish; if she found a man she liked, she’d skip the hearts and steal the form of a beautiful woman. She *was* the same girl who had once snatched Reirin’s body and plotted to seduce Gyoumei, lest anyone forget. Perhaps she ought to have argued as much, but seeing as that would mean confessing to even more of her past misdeeds, she had no choice but to keep her mouth shut.

“Setting that silly little interrogation aside...”

“After all that teasing, you’re brushing it under the rug?!”

“The real question is what Lady Houshun hoped to achieve by making you out to be a harlot.”

For all her yelling, Keigetsu had to admit that Keishou made a good point. She nodded. “I was wondering the same.”

Ran Houshun had always seemed so humble and compassionate. Even assuming she despised Keigetsu deep down, why go to the trouble of lying and

portraying her as a man-eater? Anyone would have agreed if she'd just called Keigetsu "overemotional" or "talentless."

"Kou Reirin is supposed to be close to her brothers. Maybe she thought bringing you two into the rumor was more likely to get a rise out of her."

"That's certainly possible. Still...if she was smart enough not to reveal a hint of her true nature until now, something tells me she has a more definite purpose... or *goal* in all this."

Something occurred to Keigetsu as she watched Keishou frown and hum in thought. He'd just said that Houshun had never revealed a hint of her true nature until now. That meant he believed *she* was the secret liar and Keigetsu was innocent—as easily as if that were a self-evident truth.

Such a simple gesture was all it took for Keigetsu to find herself overcome with emotion. She had to scramble to blink herself to her senses.

*Why is everyone from the Kou clan like this?*

A man's shout cut that train of thought short. "Inform his High Highness at once. Tell his page to pass along our message!"

Keigetsu and her companions spun around as several men came storming through the courtyard. A closer look revealed that each and every one of them was carrying a bow or a sword. Their faces were swathed in black cloth like they were a gang of bandits, but Keishou managed to identify them even with the masks on.

"Is that the magistrate's pages and...the ceremonial officers?"

Present were a handful of well-built pages and two strikingly strapping men. One was the Kin clan's ceremonial officer, Kin Eisen, and the other was the Gen clan's, Gen Eishou.

Keishou flagged down Eisen, who was keeping a slower pace than the rest of the men headed for Gyoumei's quarters. "What's the cause for all the commotion, Lord Eisen?"

"Oh, if it isn't Lord Keishou. As it happens, we have an urgent report for His Highness," answered the deep, rich voice of the ceremonial officer who boasted



a luxuriant beard and the charm of a middle-aged man. “I ought to be asking where *you’ve* been all this time. The rest of us have had our hands full since those bandits dropped off a letter for the magistrate.”

“A letter?” This was news to Keishou.

Eisen lowered his voice and said, “You heard me. About two hours ago, Lord Koh received a letter from the Untouchable Village. Evidently, they were the culprits in Lady Shu Keigetsu’s kidnapping. Disease is running rampant through their village, so they took a hostage to demand medicinal herbs. The message said that if we wanted Lady Shu Keigetsu back, we should meet them in secret at the forest along the border and hand over medicine and a doctor.”

Keishou, Keigetsu, and Leelee exchanged wide-eyed looks of surprise. So the untouchables had sought Lord Koh’s aid?

*I’m surprised that any of the untouchables know how to read.*

With a sigh, Keigetsu recalled the young man she’d seen on the other end of her flame spell. Lowborn though he was, he’d been handsome enough to give an actor in the imperial capital a run for his money. If she recalled correctly, Reirin had called him the son of the former village chief, so perhaps he’d been the one in charge of the negotiations.

He was the one who had informed Kou Reirin and the Eagle Eyes’ captain of the plague with a face as white as a ghost. If one had to guess, he’d determined that their own nursing efforts weren’t going to cut it and turned to the township for help. Or, judging from the supposed contents of the letter, he might’ve opted to throw their threats back at them.

*Still...the timeline doesn’t add up.*

The disease had spread around the time of the flame call—or at the very least, sometime *after* “Shu Keigetsu’s” abduction. Yet now the epidemic was being framed as the whole reason for the kidnapping.

“The magistrate had just read the letter and was about to rush into the forest all on his own...”

Eisen went on to give the dubious trio a brief explanation of what had transpired. It was the township’s negligence that had allowed the kidnapping to

happen in the first place. Racked with guilt, Lord Koh had planned to rush straight to the forest to conduct the negotiations in secret. As luck would have it, however, the ceremonial officers had observed the magistrate and his pages' frantic arrangements on their patrol of the estate. Curious, the three men had inquired about the situation, then immediately volunteered to tag along as his personal guards and witnesses. There was always the chance it might be a trap, after all.

“Lord Ran Rinki looked all over for you, but you weren’t at the ceremonial officers’ guard station. What in the world were you doing at such a critical moment?”

He had been taking care of Houshun.

*It’s all coming together now.*

Keigetsu and Keishou exchanged another round of small nods. In other words, Houshun had been stalling for time back there.

“Dear me, I’m terribly ashamed to have gone missing when I was needed most. But if this was such a ‘critical’ situation, Lord Eisen, isn’t it our job as ceremonial officers to report straight to His Highness rather than act on our own?” Keishou countered the other guard’s barb with a smile.

Eisen was undaunted. “In the event the outbreak was real, we would need to be careful about what we said. We certainly couldn’t have His Highness volunteering to join the negotiations in person. And if the contents of the letter were false, all the more reason not to feed him misinformation.” He even tugged his lips into a smirk and looked back at Keishou in accusation. “We’ve wasted enough time on false leads like *your* testimony and the Gen tassel we found on the stage. We couldn’t afford to make any more mistakes. Really, though, who could have guessed that the Shu clan’s untouchables were the ones behind their Maiden’s abduction?”

He gave an amused jerk of his chin toward the retreating figure of Gen Eishou, who had taken off down the cloister without him. “The Gens are furious that someone almost got away with framing them as the kidnappers. *He’s* been determined to bring the true culprits to justice ever since they came forward.”

It was a perfectly natural reaction. Was it a reach to assume the Rans had

even factored Gen Eishou's behavior into their scheme?

"In any event, we established contact with one of the bandits, and he admitted to both the kidnapping and the severity of the disease. It sounds like a horrifying case of dysentery. The magistrate is handling the specifics of the negotiations as we speak, but with the outbreak confirmed, it became imperative that His Highness and the township devise a strategy to handle the situation. Lord Eishou and I broke off from the talks to report back posthaste."

In short, the only ceremonial officer left by Lord Koh's side was Ran Rinki.

With a gulp, Keigetsu jumped into the conversation. "What do you plan to do after giving your report? What sort of 'strategy' do you have in mind?"

She could think of several ways to deal with a village infested with disease and despised to boot. Neglect. Quarantine. Or at worst—arson. Sweat crawled down her back as all the terrible possibilities sprang to mind.

"What will become of Shu Keigetsu? She's still trapped in the village."

"The final decision rests in His Highness's hands," said Eisen, shrugging his shoulders and inclining his head a fraction as he dodged the blame. "But in their fury, I imagine the Gens will propose burning the Untouchable Village to the ground."

"What about the Maiden?!"

"As I said, that's for His Highness to decide." Perhaps seeing "Kou Reirin" so distressed over another Maiden's well-being stoked Eisen's conscience just a hair; after that discomfited reply, he cut the conversation short with a small bow and turned his back to her. "Then, if you'll excuse me. I'm afraid this report is urgent."

Dazed, Keigetsu watched as he disappeared down the cloister with the swift gait of a military officer.

"They got us," lamented Keishou, who had been deserted by his fellow guard. "The contents of the so-called letter from the bandits don't match up with the facts. It must have been forged. Someone is trying to manipulate the flow of information. It could be Lord Koh himself...but I also have my suspicions about the Rans." He pressed a hand to his forehead as he organized his thoughts.

“Lord Rinki claimed to have looked around for me, but I never heard him call my name. It’s convenient that Lady Houshun just so happened to collapse in front of me around the same time too. I’d wager the Ran clan is involved in this case.” He went on to add, “Perhaps they’re even the masterminds.”

His suggestion reminded Keigetsu of something.

*“The magistrate was pulling the strings of the impoverished villagers. But it seems there may have been someone pulling his strings too.”*

Someone had planted a tassel to disrupt the investigation. It would be a simple matter for a Ran—a member of one of the five clans—to get their hands on one.

“Let’s go tell His Highness that the Rans might be up to something,” said Keigetsu, clinging to Keishou’s arm. “He needs to know before the other ceremonial officers start feeding him lies. Or they suggest something as horrible as setting fire to the village!”

Under most circumstances, no one would dare suggest torching the village with a Maiden still inside. But how would that change if the potential sacrifice was the infamous “sewer rat” of the Maiden Court?

Gyoumei knew “Shu Keigetsu” was really Kou Reirin. He was sure to oppose the plan. Still, he wasn’t the emperor yet. If he was pressured to forsake her from all sides—namely, the three clans of Ran, Gen, and Kin, plus the magistrate who hated his own Maiden—would his authority as crown prince be enough to win the argument?

“We should follow after the ceremonial officers this in—”

“No, we can’t.” Keishou shook his head. In a rare instance, his features were contorted in distress. “What basis would we have for our claims? There’s testimony to prove the outbreak. Meanwhile, your flame call is our only evidence that the letter doesn’t reflect the facts. Surely you don’t plan to show off your magic before the other clans’ ceremonial officers? To confess to the switch?” he asked sharply.

Keigetsu struggled to come up with a response. Daoist cultivators had been a target of oppression since a previous emperor’s reign. No one was allowed to



divine the future or invoke curses except for the imperial family's official shaman.

"But..."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't tell His Highness. Just don't do anything foolish in front of the other clans. The prince would never sit back and let them burn the village to the ground. I'll be sure to tell him about the Ran clan's suspicious behavior later, in private."

Several thoughts raced through Keishou's mind. Eventually, after a brief show of hesitation, he made a proposal: "Say...why don't we give up on the whole tea party idea?"

"What?"

It was hard to believe this was the same man who, just moments ago, had so enthusiastically encouraged her to go through with it. Keigetsu's eyes widened in shock, prompting Keishou to explain his stance. "The point of the tea party was to preempt word of the dysentery outbreak and defend 'Shu Keigetsu's' reputation. It's too late for that now that the other ceremonial officers know what's happened. The news is sure to reach the rest of the Maidens before tomorrow's gathering. That's going to make their assault on 'her' a fierce one."

"You don't believe I can keep them in line?" Keigetsu asked in a tight voice.

"I'm not belittling you. I'm worried about you," said Keishou, leaning toward her with an air of frustration. "Look. As we've seen from their methods thus far, the Ran siblings are a crafty pair. They're experts at ensnaring their enemies without getting their hands dirty, goading others to action with nothing but their words. Information warfare is their forte. This will be a tough battle for you to win."

"Just a moment ago, you were telling me to try my best despite that."

"Yes, because there was still a chance the Gens or Kins could be the masterminds. Now we've all but narrowed it down to the Ran clan. The worst possible opponent!"

His lamentations came as something of a surprise to Keigetsu, and she scrunched her brow into a frown. "What's so terrible about them? The Rans are

the mild-mannered, intellectual clan of wood. In all the Kingdom of Ei's history, they've never once had a hand in any crime or treachery. The family may have a few schemers like Ran Houshun, but they're a reasonable sort on the whole."

"You don't get it. The part that makes them so terrifying is that they've never been caught!" Keishou shouted back, striking her speechless.

*Fair.* Maybe that *was* the right way to interpret it.

Noting that Keigetsu had lapsed into silence, Keishou softened his tone in concession. "Perhaps Lord Rinki and Lady Houshun *are* the only devious ones, and the rest of the Ran clan is as mild mannered and intellectual as they're rumored to be. Regardless, it's a bad time of year to antagonize them. The harvest is right around the corner."

It was custom for the Kins to be associated with autumn, but in practice, the stars of the season were the Rans, who owned the largest farm belt in all of Ei. Skilled farmers under the patronage of wood, the Ran clan's crop yield far outstripped every other region. In the event of a conflict between the imperial family and the Ran clan, the entire kingdom's food supply would come under threat.

"But...the Rans are the ones in the wrong here, so the imperial family would be within their rights to—"

"That's not how things work in the world of politics. Of course, I'd never claim the Rans hold more power than the imperial family. But if we're going to denounce the Ran clan, we need to be careful how we go about it." Keishou crouched down to Keigetsu's eye level. "I'd rather not put you at the helm of something even His Highness would find a struggle. Leave the rest to us."

His tone was earnest, not a hint of disrespect to be found.

Leelee, who had been listening to their exchange, hesitantly chimed in. "You ought to take him up on his offer, Lady Keigetsu. I agree that it's a little too much to ask of you. I mean, how could we have known that the 'virtuous' Lady Houshun had such hidden depths? It'd be best to give up and let His Highness and Master Keishou—"

"No thanks." Keigetsu abruptly balled her hands into fists, glaring at Keishou

and Leelee. “I’m going to hold this tea party.”

“Look. If you’re worried about violating His Highness’s orders, I’ll take the responsibility of convincing—”

“That’s not the problem!” When Keishou reached out to give her a placating pat on the shoulder, she batted his hand aside. “Why should the victim be the one to back down? Why can’t I fight back? That snake is out to destroy ‘me’ and burn a whole village to the ground. How do you expect me to sit back and twiddle my thumbs?!”

Not long ago, *she* had been the one with cold feet about the tea party, but now she felt a fire raging deep inside her—almost like the firewood Kou Reirin had brandished in her dance several days ago. Keigetsu believed her message at last: With a fire in her heart, she could overcome any foe.

“Oh, is the Ran clan’s cunning supposed to be scary? An idiot like me wouldn’t know! Navigating diplomacy is hard? Who cares! I don’t know the first thing about politics! But there’s one thing I *do* know.” Keigetsu jabbed a finger at Keishou’s chest, carefully punctuating each and every word. “Right now, someone is out to malign and ruin me *and* the girl in my form. I’m not going to let that stand.”

Deep down, some part of her was appalled that she’d say something so rash in the heat of the moment. At the same time, something else inside her said, *Say, Kou Reirin. I finally understand how you can be so reckless.*

Indeed. Keigetsu finally understood.

Kou Reirin was beloved by all. Protected by all. She had so many kind, reliable men to sing her praises and build up her confidence. Hope swelling in her chest, she’d then set out to live up to their expectations—only to have the opportunity snatched from under her. All of it came from a place of unmitigated kindness called “concern.”

*When it comes down to it, he doesn’t believe in me at all...*

Keigetsu had always dreamed of how pleasant it would be to be loved. She’d longed to be surrounded by people who would fret over her and protect her, imagining how sweet and flustering it must feel. Hence, she’d tried to steal that

for herself once upon a time.

But now that someone was worried about her for the first time—and holding her back out of that sincere concern—she changed her mind. She *hated* this. She didn't want to sit back and let someone protect her.

She had her pride. She had a reason to fight. She had something she wanted to win. She wanted to walk on her own two feet!

Was it the influence of Kou Reirin's body at work? Keigetsu thought she'd never understand the independent spirit inherent to earth types, yet here she was getting her very own taste of it.

"Listen to me! As we've just seen, Ran Houshun is already going around telling people what a vile woman I am. Whether I hold tomorrow's tea party or run away, there's no changing the damage she's done. Heaven knows Shu Keigetsu was the big bad villainess of the Maiden Court long before she started those rumors, anyway."

Keigetsu twisted her lips into a cynical smile, turning first to the stunned Keishou and then to Leelee. "I've insulted my fellow Maidens, raised a hand against my court ladies, and tormented the eunuchs. I've gossiped, I've sucked up to those in power, and—to top it all off—I nearly shoved Kou Reirin to her death. Then I stole her body and plotted to seduce His Highness! But you know what? At least I always put my own life on the line to do it!"

In the heat of the moment, she blurted out all the crimes she'd managed to keep hidden from Keishou. It mattered little, though. The fire in her heart swept through the rest of her body in the blink of an eye, raging like an inferno.

"And what about Ran Houshun, huh? She's all talk—an evildoer who doesn't have the guts to get her own hands dirty. I might be a talentless, inept villainess, but I'm still leagues above her. I'm going to use this tea party to teach her a lesson."

"I don't think there's a villainess ranking..." Leelee muttered, exasperated.

"Oh, shut up," Keigetsu shot back with a glare, then turned on her heel.

"Wha... Lady Keigetsu!" Keishou shouted.



“I’ve already made up my mind. Go join the ceremonial officers’ debriefing and gather some intel.” Dismissing his attempts to stop her, she rushed back to her personal quarters.

“Lady Keigetsu!” Leelee cried, hurrying to catch up to her from behind. “I’m glad to see you’re so fired up...or, well, I get where you’re coming from as a fellow Shu, but what exactly are you planning to do?”

“Let’s see... If I were the same as I was a few months ago, I might scream at the top of my lungs and tackle Ran Houshun to the ground, or maybe punch her in the face, break a pot, kick a Ran court lady around, or resort to financial blackmail...”

“Why do you have a whole list of dirty moves ready to go?! You’re not doing any of that! You’re Lady Kou Reirin right now, remember?!”

“I know that.”

Keigetsu racked her brains for all they were worth as she rushed down the cloister. What would be the best way to get back at Ran Houshun without damaging Reirin’s reputation? No, forget revenge—she first had to consider how to neutralize the other girl’s attacks.

Ran Houshun was attempting to spread scandal about Shu Keigetsu. Her ultimate goal was probably to see the village burned down, and to that end, she had to convince everyone that it would be no loss to kill a villainess like Shu Keigetsu in the crossfire.

She’d gone out of her way to paint Keigetsu as a “man-eater” in her attempts to discredit the Shu Maiden. There had to be a good reason for that. No doubt she planned to attack from that angle during the tea party too.

*“She said she might slip them an aphrodisiac.”*

“...”

Bringing a hand to her chin, Keigetsu considered her options. She didn’t know how well she could lead the conversation. But as things stood, she had no choice but to take the plunge.

As soon as she made it back to her room, she had an order for both her

attendant and Tousetsu, who had been working diligently on the preparations. “Leelee. Tousetsu. Look through Kou Reirin’s belongings at once. There’s something I need you to prepare for me.”

The unusually dignified ring of her voice saw Leelee and Tousetsu spring to attention, then exchange a pair of puzzled glances.

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*It’s time.*

Soft sunbeams filtered into the room. Keigetsu looked out over the elegant arrangements of wildflowers and the pastries and plates so beautifully laid out over the table.

*Bring it on.*

It was the peaceful hour a touch too early in the day to be considered noon. The clouds shrouding the sun robbed the summer morning of its usual balminess, but the less intense heat was preferable to noblewomen who seldom ventured outside.

Thus would the Maidens deepen their bonds while savoring a moderately regulated sense of “adventure”—or so was the intended spirit of a tea party held amid this excursion. Today, however, not a single Maiden would be arriving with such intentions. Although Gyomei had requested this function to put the other girls’ minds at ease, surely no one counted on that happening. The way Keigetsu saw it, drinking tea with the enemy was no way to relieve stress.

What was about to unfold was one big woman-to-woman mind game and mud-slinging contest under the guise of comfort.

“The Maidens have arrived,” Tousetsu gracefully announced from her place beside the door.

For a brief moment, Keigetsu pursed her lips into a thin line.

“Good day to you, Lady Reirin.”

“Good day. I appreciate the invitation.”

“Good morning. Thank you for bringing us all together.”

The Maidens filed in through the open door one after the other.

First was Kin Seika, her face perfectly made up and her loose waves of hair pulled into a glamorous updo.

Next was Gen Kasui, who entered the room with the brusque manner of a military officer and not a hint of emotion.

Last came Ran Houshun, reminiscent of a small animal in how she nervously hid the bottom half of her face.

Leaving their attending court ladies to line up against the walls, the trio stood before the round table set out for them.

“Please have a seat,” said Keigetsu, steeling her resolve as she called out to them in the sweetest voice she could muster.

All three girls said a word of thanks before taking their seats. Thus, the tea party had begun. The Maidens exchanged brief glances as they pulled up their chairs. Blatant excitement glimmered in each of their eyes.

There was no doubt about it—they all *knew*.

The girls had to be sick of the unforeseen period of self-isolation following the kidnapping, spending their rare excursion locked up in their rooms without so much as a single banquet to break up the monotony. Throwing the bandits’ letter and news of the disease into the mix must have whetted their appetites as much as a glorious feast at the end of a fast.

When, how, and by whom would the topic be broached? Keigetsu could see the calculation and exhilaration in the gazes that crossed hers for a fleeting moment.

“Say, Lady Reirin—”

“I apologize for picking a time that’s a little too early for lunch. I thought it might be best to do this when it wasn’t quite so hot... I’ve prepared some light refreshments, so please help yourselves,” Keigetsu announced, cutting Seika off as soon as she opened her mouth. *She* was the one running the show here.

If Keigetsu had interrupted her in her own form, Seika would have been sure to scrunch her shapely brow into a frown. When the words were coming from

Kou Reirin's polite, gentle voice and ethereal features, however, she hid her mouth behind her fan as if ashamed to have spoken before the hostess, simply responding, "My apologies."

Upon flashing Seika a smile, Keigetsu even sensed the slightest bit of relief in return.

*Oh... This is it, she thought. This is what it means to be "Kou Reirin."*

Surely the girl herself—the innately beautiful Kou Reirin—had no idea how much she enchanted the people around her. But Keigetsu knew. She knew because she'd glared enviously at the butterfly ever since she herself was derided as a sewer rat.

Beauty was a gift. Its mere presence was enough to catch the eye and stir the heart. A single word from her lips or a glance of her eyes could assert dominance with a strength far greater than Reirin realized.

*Right now, I'm Kou Reirin. I'll definitely be all right,* Keigetsu told herself, then smiled the placid sort of smile that just screamed "Kou Reirin."

"I imagine you've lost your appetites amid the long stretch of hot and humid weather. I prepared us an aperitif to start." Keigetsu pointed to a white porcelain bowl in the middle of the table, which the other Maidens leaned toward with interest.

"My. Is this...grape wine?"

When it came to the aperitifs women sipped before meals or ceremonies, fruit wine made from pickled plums or apricots was traditional in the Kingdom of Ei. Yet what filled the wide-mouthed serving bowl before them was a reddish-purple liquid that shone like a gem. What's more, a generous helping of unpeeled slices of fresh fruit, like citruses, pomegranates, and grapes, bobbed on the surface to give it an extra splash of color.

The girls' eyes lit up as each Maiden took a sip from the cup served to her.

"How exquisite!"

As they strung words of praise together, Keigetsu studied them from behind her smile.

*I've always hated these sorts of conversations. I never understood the point.*

The same went for poetry and embroidery critiques. You'd think a "That's very nice" ought to suffice, but a Maiden had to express her thoughts in a way that demonstrated her culture and unique sensibilities, with her worth as a woman measured by how well she managed it. Thus, Keigetsu had always seethed with jealousy whenever Reirin or Seika said something intelligent, and she'd sneered with relief when Kasui or Houshun made an insipid comment.

Only now did she realize how childish she had been.

Their ability to say something sophisticated was secondary. When it came to these Maidens representing their respective clans, where did each one stand in the battles of information warfare known as tea ceremonies or poetry gatherings? What impression were they trying to make on those around them? Determining the answers to those questions was of far greater importance.

"Do I taste clove, cinnamon, star anise, and fennel? I see you added several spices to the wine along with the fruits. I've adored the delicate aroma of fennel ever since I was a little girl."

Seika, for instance, wasn't just flaunting her acute sense of taste with that comment. She was asserting that she was well versed in commercial goods and that the Kin clan's vast fortunes had given her access to luxury items like spices from an early age.

"Oh. Does it have honey in it too? It's sweet and goes down smooth, but it's not as cloying as most fruit wines. The Worthy Consort isn't one for sweets, but I'm sure even she could enjoy this. I wish I could bring some back as a souvenir."

Kasui's assessment wasn't as shallow as it sounded. It held the implication that the Gen clan's Maiden and consort were on good enough terms that she was still thinking of her guardian this far from home.

"Wow, this is so yummy! It's mouthwateringly delicious..."

And then there was Ran Houshun, who flailed adorably as she pressed her hands to her cheeks.

Her court ladies giggled at her antics. "Milady, you silly girl! That's improper."



“Hrk... I’m sorry.” Houshun turned on the puppy-dog eyes. “But it really is good. You should all have a sip!”

*See? I knew it,* thought Keigetsu.

Ran Houshun, the ingenue beloved by her court ladies—that was the character she wanted to play.

Upon closer inspection, even the townswomen sent to help with the preparations for the tea party were smiling fondly at the innocent young girl. These were the same women who had given “Shu Keigetsu” a downright frosty reception.

Out of all the proud noblewomen, the Ran Maiden was “the approachable one” who inspired others to look out for her. It was the sort of demeanor bound to be a hit with the women of the southern territory, who valued affability in their associates. Having no doubt accounted for that, Houshun was likely playing up her childishness even more than usual. She was trying to impress upon everyone that *she* was the one who had won the most hearts on this excursion.

“I see you’re well loved no matter where you go, Lady Houshun,” Keigetsu prodded her, taking care not to sound sarcastic.

Houshun blushed and flapped her hands back and forth. “No, erm... I’ve been taking advantage of the townspeople’s kindness, that’s all. I’m truly grateful they’ve made my stay such a comfortable one.” She followed that humble reply by clamping both hands over her mouth, as though she realized she’d misspoken. “Oh! I must apologize. I shouldn’t say it’s been ‘comfortable’... There’s Lady Keigetsu to be concerned about, of course, and I’m sure *you’ve* been worried sick about your big brother.”

It was impressive how naturally she’d turned the conversation to “Shu Keigetsu’s” abduction.

Gen Kasui jumped on the topic like she’d been waiting for her chance. “About that, Lady Reirin. Perhaps you’ve already heard, but the ceremonial officers have brought further news regarding Lady Keigetsu’s kidnapping.”

It was rare to see her take the lead in a conversation. The reason she was so

talkative was that, until the previous night, there had been suspicion in the air that the Gens were behind the kidnapping due to the discarded tassel. She hoped to dispel the doubts about her clan by loudly declaring the true culprit to be the southern territory's untouchables.

Perhaps it was her overserious nature at work, or perhaps it was her loyalty to her clan, but Kasui seemed rather distraught over the suspicions of foul play from the Gens. Though she kept her voice low, there was a hint of impatience to it. "Last night, the untouchables dropped off a letter. It was the denizens of this very township who abducted Lady Keigetsu."

Kasui provided a to-the-point explanation of what she knew. According to the letter, disease was running rampant through the village, and its populace had kidnapped Shu Keigetsu to get their hands on some medicine. The magistrate had immediately left to negotiate, bringing the ceremonial officers with him as his witnesses and guards.

"I heard the same from Uncle Eisen. The chief of the bandits showed up to the negotiations and attested to the horrors of the affliction. The ceremonial officers ran straight back to His Highness to report on the situation, and they're currently in talks about how to respond," Seika was quick to add—probably to demonstrate that the Kin clan was likewise up to date on current events.

"My brother was another one of the ceremonial officers who attended the negotiations... He said the bandit flew into a rage and attacked the magistrate soon after the Kin and Gen officers left. The pages were left no choice but to, um, neutralize him," Houshun said woefully. "What a horrible thought."

*It was obviously to keep his mouth shut!* Keigetsu had to stop herself from screaming. If she hadn't known the truth from her flame call, she might have fallen for Houshun's lies herself. The girl's "cute critter" act packed quite the punch.

"I never would have guessed a disease was the reason behind Lady Keigetsu's abduction... It's scary enough to be kidnapped at all. How distraught must she be, caught in the middle of a plague?" Her voice trembling, Houshun hid her eyes behind her sleeves. "And it's dysentery too... My brother said that in areas ravaged with the disease, corpses exposed to the constant streams of filthy

human waste can swell and explode from the stench. Sometimes hordes of insects will come crawling out of the remains. If I ever witnessed that up close... gosh, I think a crybaby like me would lose my mind.”

Her description was gruesome enough to make the Maidens’ previously vague revulsion toward the concept of dysentery skyrocket.

To no surprise, Seika—who adored beauty and despised filth above all else—seemed to lose her patience with the sniveling Houshun and her gross remarks. “Could you please refrain from such disgusting talk while we’re eating? And you should really do something about your habit of crying over nothing.”

“S-sorry... I-I just feel so bad for Lady Keigetsu...” Houshun hunched in on herself, her shoulders shaking in fright. “The township’s magistrate came under attack, and the Gens stood falsely accused, so I’ve heard that both parties are itching to burn the village to the ground. Nobody even cares that Lady Keigetsu is still in there. His Highness is of the opinion that we should send an advance team to check on the situation first, but the mere suggestion makes me feel s-so, so bad for her...”

The sight of her choking up and repeating the childish “I feel bad” sentiment over and over was anathema to Seika. The more sympathetic Houshun acted toward “Shu Keigetsu,” the more she pushed the other Maiden to be the bad guy out of spite.

“Is ‘I feel bad’ all you can say? You’re not a child. Shu Keigetsu is a Maiden just the same as the rest of us, and a Maiden is expected to prize her nobility above all else. She’d be better off dying in a fire than succumbing to such a foul disease.”

Kasui leaned forward. “I’d say burning her to death is a bit—” she blurted out, only to settle back down in her chair like she was ashamed of her behavior. “No, you have a point. If one’s honor or allegiance is violated, the only recourse is to perish in flame. That’s the way it ought to be...and we Maidens should accept that,” she muttered, hanging her head. It sounded almost like she was trying to convince herself.

Everyone else seemed perplexed by her sudden bout of nerves, but by the time Kasui looked back up, she was wearing her usual deadpan expression. “I’m

most concerned that Lady Keigetsu might bring the disease back to the township or His Highness. Although my heart goes out to both her and the untouchables, perhaps it's more merciful to burn them to death and be done with it than burden them with the sin of spreading a plague."

The Gen clan's desire to burn the village in revenge for the aspersions likely influenced her actions. She cited the lives of Gyomei and the townspeople rather than an abstraction like "nobility," lending more legitimacy to the idea of torching the place with Shu Keigetsu still inside.

"The loyalty of a Gen is beyond reproach. We would never sit back and allow harm to come to the Heavens. If this were to happen up north, we would order the magistrate to set the village ablaze without even waiting for the inspection. Leading the people calls for making hard decisions sometimes."

"But it'd be awful to set the fire before we even know what's happened to her..." Houshun mumbled in protest.

"If she's still in good health, she can meet up with the advance team and make a run for it. If she's indisposed with illness, then she'll stay behind and burn," Seika said bluntly. "It's the same as the Lion's Judgment."

"I only hope Lady Keigetsu hasn't fallen ill," Kasui added.

By the time she gave voice to that wish, an undercurrent of "If she *has* contracted dysentery, Shu Keigetsu must burn" filled the room.

*I'm impressed*, Keigetsu said to herself as she adjusted her grip on her round fan.

Thus far, Houshun had remained consistent in her support of "Shu Keigetsu." Yet in doing so, she had spurred both Seika and Kasui to oppose her, thus steering the conversation in the direction she wanted it to go.

"I-I guess so. What matters most is that Lady Keigetsu stays in good health... I'm sure she can play her cards right with the bandits to keep herself safe..."

Plus, she began muttering such assurances like she was trying to make herself believe them.

"Please," snorted Seika, predictably dubious of such a claim. "You seem to

have an awful lot of faith in Lady Keigetsu. I don't recall her *ever* playing her cards right, apart from her dances for the Ghost Festival and the pre-celebration."

"Oh, erm... That's not what I meant..." Houshun trailed off in distress, then flicked her gaze toward Keigetsu—or "Kou Reirin," in this case. "Lady Keigetsu, um..."

*Aha, so that's her game.* Keigetsu finally put together what Houshun was trying to do.

Behind her, she sensed Tousetsu and Leelee tense up ever so slightly. They, too, must have deduced Houshun's goal in approaching "Kou Reirin" the other night.

"Go on, Lady Houshun," Keigetsu prompted, going out of her way to give her rival permission to speak. "If there's something you'd like to say, please go ahead. Don't mind me."

She was determined to go along with this act until she'd drained every last bit of pus from the abscess.

"Erm, I mentioned this to Miss Reirin earlier, but Lady Keigetsu seems to lack...inhibition. Uh, when it comes to men, I mean."

Lo, the next words Houshun squeaked out came as little surprise.

"'Lacks inhibition' how?"

"What do you mean?"

Intrigued, both Seika and Kasui took the bait. This was a novel angle from which to attack the Shu Maiden.

Houshun made an initial show of reluctance to repeat it. It was only after she'd given herself the excuse of Seika and Kasui's persistent questioning that she started to talk, her eyes swimming with panicked tears. "Lady Keigetsu has a fondness for manly men, it seems... I've often caught her leering at the ceremonial officers."

"You can't be serious." Seika dismissed her with a laugh. "Even I know she has a thing for good-looking men. It's not just His Highness—she can't even keep



her eyes off the captain of the Eagle Eyes. But that's the extent of it, isn't it? She's a coward who has nothing going for her but a stupid amount of pride. She'd never have the guts to seduce someone."

It was meant as a no-holds-barred put-down, but nevertheless, it was an astute observation.

While Keigetsu watched Seika with conflicted emotions, Houshun's face fell. "You'd be right if all she did was ogle them. But..."

"But what?"

"I overheard her talking to herself once. She said that...she was going to take advantage of her position as hostess to slip them an aphrodisiac."

*Aphrodisiac.* The sketchy, obscene term made quite the impact as it echoed through the room in broad daylight.

"Did you say 'aphrodisiac'?" Kasui furrowed her brow in dismay. "Isn't that an object of legend long buried alongside the heathen mystic arts? Do you mean to tell me those are real?"

"I don't know. But...rumor has it that Lady Keigetsu's father was an odd man with aspirations of becoming a Daoist cultivator. So maybe..."

Even a bald-faced lie sounded plausible when it contained a shred of truth. Upon recalling the reason why Keigetsu was considered the lowest-ranking daughter of the Shu clan, the Maidens slowly began to give serious consideration to Houshun's claims.

"Supposing aphrodisiacs *do* exist, why slip the ceremonial officers one and not His Highness?" asked Seika. "It makes no sense."

"I-I wondered about that too, but that's what she told me..."

"What exactly did she say?" Kasui pressed.

"Umm... That she wanted to use her position as hostess to slip those manly ceremonial officers an aphrodisiac. And that if she's going to end up the lowest-ranking consort who can be 'gifted' either way, she ought to be allowed a bit of 'fun'..."

The reason she went with the same exact story she'd told "Kou Reirin" the

previous night was likely to avoid exaggerating the details and creating discrepancies. As long as she kept things simple, all she'd have to do was plant a suspicious-looking vial in Keigetsu's room later on.

"Why did she pick *you* to admit this to?"

"I-I don't think she saw me as a full-fledged Maiden..." Clutching at her sleeves, Houshun pressed her hands to her chest. "At first, I only happened to overhear her talking to herself, but she kept going even after she'd noticed I was there. I'm a coward, as you all know, and I always get so nervous, so perhaps she thought I'd be easy to handle. In fact, when I tried to admonish her, she threatened me to keep the whole thing quiet and left it at that."

The other Maidens lapsed into a troubled silence after she delivered that faltering "confession." It was common knowledge among the Maiden Court that Shu Keigetsu was the sort to glare balefully at the Maidens she deemed her betters and sneer down upon those she deemed her lessers. It was entirely plausible that she might have found an aphrodisiac among her late father's belongings, lost all semblance of self-control from the relief of being back in her old home, and bragged about her schemes to the powerless Ran Houshun without a hint of caution.

Even the townswomen hanging back in the corner began to whisper among themselves.

"I can't believe this. How shameless can one woman be?"

"But it's not that far-fetched. You know what she's like..."

"I feel terrible for the poor Ran Maiden."

Observing their hostility toward Shu Keigetsu only deepened Seika and Kasui's suspicions. Most townspeople wouldn't look so coldly upon the Maiden of their own domain. Perhaps, then, their resentment of her stemmed from something unbeknownst to the other clans—for instance, her behavior prior to joining the Maiden Court. Or perhaps she really *had* tried to slip someone an aphrodisiac on this excursion.

"You can't be serious," Seika murmured for the second time.

It was the same thing she'd said earlier, but the target of her indignation had

shifted from Houshun to Keigetsu. The main-line descendants of the Kin clan valued pride and detested foul play. She found it completely unacceptable that a fellow Maiden would plot to mess around with other men and employ means as shady as an aphrodisiac to do it.

“If that’s true, Shu Keigetsu is the lowest of the low.”

“Um, but that’s not why I brought it up,” Houshun said in a fluster, seemingly cowed by Seika’s rage. “It might have been a joke, and besides...if she’s that uninhibited...or, er, if she knows her way around men, she might have the confidence to handle the ruffians who kidnapped her. I only meant that it might work in her favor in this case!”

Tears welled in her eyes as she insisted that she just wanted Lady Keigetsu to stay safe. She was the perfect picture of a purehearted yet naive Maiden—which made the girls who prided themselves on being more worldly want to shatter her illusions.

“Even if she makes it out unscathed, won’t that mean she traded her chastity for her life?” Kasui cut in, her voice dark. “That’s what a situation helped by ‘knowing her way around men’ implies, isn’t it? It means surrendering her body to her captors in exchange for being fed, kept away from the sick, and allowed to live...or perhaps even slipping them an aphrodisiac and subjugating them in bed.”

“N-none of us know what demands her captors might make of her! It’s possible they’ll settle for money and goods.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. I can’t imagine those being enough to satisfy men pushed to the brink by starvation and disease.”

Known for their mercilessness in battle, the Gens prided themselves on being unfettered by emotions like pity or compassion. The more Houshun optimistically sugarcoated the facts, the more the “ruthless and pragmatic” Gen Maiden wanted to contradict her.

“Then, even if Lady Keigetsu does make it back safe...she might be defiled beyond redemption as a Maiden,” Seika muttered, struggling to keep her voice even.

Listening to all this, Keigetsu suppressed a sigh. *She's good. I'm impressed that she managed to lead the discussion to this point.*

On one hand, Ran Houshun had impressed upon everyone the horrors of dysentery and solidified the idea that a Maiden was better off burned alive if infected with dysentery, and on the other, she'd made Keigetsu out to be a promiscuous woman and convinced them that if she made it back alive, it would only be because she sold herself to the bandits. Whether or not "Shu Keigetsu" contracted the illness, the tone was set that she was better off dead. *This was the script Houshun had written.*

*She certainly knows how to work a conversation,* Keigetsu scoffed in her mind.

Ran Houshun had always appeared so virtuous, timid, and harmless. Just how many talks had she secretly manipulated with her halting speech and understated, carefully worded lies? Even Keigetsu—and Kou Reirin, for that matter—might never have caught on to her true nature.

If it weren't for the switch, that is.

*Too bad.*

In reality, Keigetsu was the one driving "Kou Reirin's" body now. She knew for a fact all the things Shu Keigetsu had or hadn't said.

She exhaled a long breath, forced herself to relax, and adopted a languid tone. "An aphrodisiac, was it?"

It was just a single sentence—but when it emerged in the bell-like tinkle of her voice, that was all it took to draw the attention of those around her.

"Lady Reirin?" her fellow Maidens prompted as they turned their heads.

She gave a small shake of her head. "Oh, I beg your pardon." Then she stared at Ran Houshun the way Kou Reirin so often did. She glued the girl's gaze to the spot with one piercing look from her dewy black eyes. "Lady Houshun. Out of curiosity, did Lady Keigetsu sound like she was bragging when she told you about the aphrodisiac?"

"Huh?"

"I must confess, the incident you described rings a bell. It *does* sound like

something Lady Keigetsu would say.” She backed up Houshun’s claims, casting her eyes downward in mock sadness.

This was the first time “Kou Reirin” had ever sounded reproachful of Shu Keigetsu. Delighted to have the most influential Maiden on her side—but doing her best not to let that show—Houshun nodded and answered in the affirmative. “Yes. I remember she sounded quite proud of herself.”

“Did she say things like, ‘I’ll be fine as long as I have this!’ or ‘Why hasn’t anyone else tried this?’ And with an air of triumph?”

“Yes...” Houshun glumly corroborated the bogus suggestion. “She didn’t seem to feel a shred of remorse.”

“She’s awful,” Seika spat in disgust. “Has she no shame at all?”

“I found that part of it appalling myself.” Not one to let an opportunity slide, Houshun seized on her remark. “Perhaps any weak-willed Maiden might be tempted to exploit such disreputable drugs at least once in her life. But Lady Keigetsu didn’t even hesitate. To think she’d succumb to her desire to drug someone and not even feel ashamed... It made me realize what a terrifying person she is.”

Once she’d thoroughly painted Shu Keigetsu as a villainess, she cast her would-be ally a pleading look. “Did she behave that way in front of you too, Miss Reirin? That was bold of her. How could she suggest drugging your brother to your face when everyone knows how close you Kou siblings are?”

That one translated to something like: *Shu Keigetsu is a vile villainess who would endanger your beloved brothers, so you’d be happy to denounce her once and for all, right?*

Instead, Keigetsu smiled. “You think so? I don’t agree with that at all.”

“What?”

It was a blink-and-you-miss-it moment. For a second, the small animal mask Ran Houshun had worn for so long peeled away.

However, it didn’t take her long to smooth her face into a blank look and ask, “Wh-what do you mean?”



Without missing a beat, Keigetsu shot back a surprising answer. “Hee hee. Well...is an aphrodisiac really such a terrible thing?”

“Huh...?”

It was an audacious remark coming from a girl known for her irreproachable conduct. Even Seika and Kasui joined Houshun in wide-eyed shock.

“Pardon?”

“Are you saying that to protect Lady Keigetsu?” Kasui asked, bemused. “I know it’s in your nature to look for the good in everyone, Lady Reirin, but defending the use of an aphrodisiac to prey on men is a step too—”

“I’m not saying this for Lady Keigetsu’s sake. If anything, well...” Keigetsu put a hand to her cheek, tilting her head to one side. “I’m covering my own tracks.”

“Huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“What?”

All three girls voiced their disbelief in unison.

Fully conscious of their gazes upon her, Keigetsu flashed them an awkward smile. “You see,” she said, “it was I who gave Lady Keigetsu that ‘aphrodisiac.’”

While the trio sat there speechless, Keigetsu ordered Tousetsu to serve them each a second helping of the aperitif. She then picked up her own cup in an unhurried motion.

“As you all know,” she began, “Lady Keigetsu doesn’t have a guardian consort at the moment. Under the circumstances, the responsibility of presiding over the Harvest Festival left her at her wits’ end. Surely I needn’t explain how bumbling and high-strung she can be?”

Despite their bewilderment, the three girls nodded back without hesitation. The corner of Keigetsu’s lip almost twitched at that.

*You could pause a little longer than that, you know!* she thought to herself, though she didn’t let a hint of it show on her face.

“I’d often hear Lady Keigetsu complaining, ‘I can’t handle this!’ or ‘What am I

supposed to do?’ Yet she never gave up on the vital task entrusted to her. She begged me—a member of another clan—for help, polished her performance to a shine, and forwent sleep in her tireless efforts to prepare for the event.”

Keigetsu had gotten a little more fired up than she’d meant to when describing her efforts. Frankly speaking, she just wanted *someone* to know and appreciate how much work she’d put in.

“But...she was surrounded by those who would rather scoff at her efforts than praise them.”

At that, her expression darkened—as if to emphasize the tragedy of it all.

“A good deal of those people were court ladies from the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Having pinned all their hopes on the former Noble Consort’s good standing, these women held no interest in reviving the palace after her exile and instead chose to flee the court altogether. But that would reflect poorly on them. Thus, they spread the self-serving, malicious lie that the blame for their resignation lay squarely with the Maiden who would succeed her: Lady Keigetsu.”

Just as dead men tell no tales, the court ladies who had left the palace could no longer attest to the truth. In part due to her own grudge, Keigetsu pinned the blame for her terrible reputation on the women who had been so quick to abandon the Shu Palace.

“Talentless, lazy, a sycophant, a loose woman... Perhaps a few of those things are true. But some of them are blatant lies. Yet all of them were taken to be the truth, circulated around the court, and eventually made it back to Lady Keigetsu’s own ears.”

She’d painted the court ladies as responsible for the rumors in case Houshun claimed to have heard the lie of “Keigetsu the man-eater” from someone else. No matter how many people had attested to Shu Keigetsu’s lecherous ways, it all traced back to the Shu court ladies. By defining the source of the rumor like that, she could call its credibility into question.

“Lady Keigetsu was hurt. She kept saying things like, ‘Everyone hates me’ or ‘Someone as reviled as me could never make a decent hostess’... I couldn’t bear to watch, so I decided to lend her a little something.” Keigetsu raised her cup in

the air. “Alcohol to warm the body and set a tense mind at ease. The sweet temptation of honey. Figs to symbolize fertility, pomegranate to make an arrangement of fruit look all the more alluring, and a myriad of stimulating spices. Indeed...”

The Maidens’ gazes were drawn first to their cups, then to the bowl filled with the same liquid. Luscious fruit bobbed along its surface, and the reddish-purple wine shimmered invitingly in the light.

“Her so-called ‘aphrodisiac’ was this very aperitif.”

When the whole room gasped, Keigetsu flashed them her most radiant smile of all. “This is what I said to her: If someone is slow to warm up to you, just have them drink this aperitif. It will soften their heart and win you their affections, and everything will work out all right. I told her it’s like an ‘aphrodisiac,’ so to speak.”

“Then, when she mentioned slipping the ceremonial officers an aphrodisiac...?” Seika said, flabbergasted.

Keigetsu was quick to respond. “Lady Keigetsu was very preoccupied with being a good hostess. It’s no surprise, then, that she planned to woo everyone by serving this at a banquet. Though the idea of winning people over with a party is somewhat boorish, she thought the rumored pick for the lowest-ranking consort ought to be permitted that much ‘fun.’ For the record, it wasn’t just the ceremonial officers to whom she planned to serve this ‘aphrodisiac.’ Haven’t you noticed? She was watching all of us so intently.” For the clincher, she lowered her voice and slowly declared, “In truth...Lady Keigetsu just wanted to get along with everyone.”

Silence fell over the room. Seika’s and Kasui’s eyes were filled with shock and a tinge of guilt. That was to be expected. The malice in their depiction of Shu Keigetsu to that point ought to have made her “true” form appear all the more sympathetic.

“Also...”

Out of the corner of her eye, Keigetsu saw Leelee clenching her fists in excitement. So too was Tousetsu watching her with a hint of a flush on her expressionless face.

Though she was careful not to make eye contact with the two court ladies, she spoke to them in her mind: *I know. I'll be sure to pull it off.*

This was the moment of truth.

“As for why I would refer to this aperitif as an ‘aphrodisiac,’ well...that’s what Her Majesty the Empress likes to call it.”

*The empress.* Dropping the name of the most powerful woman in the inner court saw the Maidens snap to attention.

Girding her loins, Keigetsu went on as deliberately as she could. “When I first came to the Maiden Court, I was just as worried as Lady Keigetsu about whether I’d be able to make friends. It was on that occasion that Her Majesty first served me this aperitif. Ever the jester, she gave me quite a shock when she referred to it as an ‘aphrodisiac.’”

Next, she brought Kenshuu’s brazen personality into the picture. The explanation that Kou Reirin had nicknamed the aperitif an “aphrodisiac” might raise a few eyebrows, but no one would question it coming from the empress. Being a vocal nonbeliever, she was well known for her attitude of irreverence toward folklore and curses.

Keigetsu cast a glance around the table, then pressed a hand to her cheek in dismay. “The item I gave Lady Keigetsu is the very drink of which you just partook. It was a gift from Her Majesty, so I called it an ‘aphrodisiac’ like she does...but I never dreamed that would lead to such a misunderstanding. I’m truly sorry for that.”

Though she’d framed it as an apology, her words could be translated into plain speech like so: *The thing you called an “aphrodisiac” was actually a gift from the empress. You wouldn’t dare disparage an offering—or a nickname—from the highest authority in the inner court, would you?*

Tousetsu and Leelee each pressed their lips into a thin line. Not because they were nervous but because they were assured of their victory. It probably felt like all their hard work of turning over travel cases until dawn had finally paid off.

Indeed. Upon concluding the conversation with Ran Houshun and returning to

her room the previous night, Keigetsu had ordered her court ladies to prepare “something from the empress that could feasibly be called an ‘aphrodisiac.’”

*“Her Majesty sent me off with some rare candies and liquor.”*

Keigetsu clearly remembered Reirin mentioning that on the road. Given how close the empress was to her ward, it was no surprise that Kenshuu had sent Kou Reirin on this outing with a large number of gifts. It could be a drink, a rare food, or even incense or smelling salts—whatever the case, the idea was to find something that could be considered “arousing” to pass off as their aphrodisiac.

Of course, rather than a *real* aphrodisiac, it would just be a refreshment playfully referred to as such. If the plan was to bring up the aphrodisiac as evidence that Keigetsu was a man-eater, the best move was to first acknowledge its existence and then laugh it off as a joke. It was a bit of a stretch, but if she implied it had come from the empress, the Maidens would think twice before denouncing the “potion.” Keigetsu had taken a gamble on that.

*I’m sure Kou Reirin would never even think to exploit the empress’s influence.*

She knew how much Reirin valued self-reliance, but it was all right. Keigetsu was a villainess—a woman who wouldn’t hesitate to abuse her position.

“Oh...” Houshun’s eyes showed a hint of swift calculation. She was considering how to overcome this crisis.

Before she could open her mouth, Keigetsu piled on another attack. “Speaking of misunderstandings,” she said, “I think you have the wrong idea about dysentery, Lady Houshun.”

“Huh?”

“Earlier, you spoke of swollen corpses and other such horrors. However, the empress once cared for His Majesty when he was stricken with the disease, and she told me it isn’t so terrible an affliction,” Keigetsu declared with finality.

Needless to say, she had never discussed this Kenshuu. In truth, her assertion was more or less a bluff from someone who knew next to nothing about dysentery or its symptoms. But that didn’t matter. The important part was to stress that even the emperor had come down with dysentery once.



The Maidens turned paler than ever when she mentioned “His Majesty.”

“I believe Her Majesty told you this story at the tea party a while back, no? Over twenty years ago, His Majesty contracted dysentery during a visit to a flood-stricken region, and Her Majesty nursed him back to health.”

Keigetsu had been in Reirin’s form at the time—and bedridden to boot—but the anecdote had made its way around the court until it eventually reached her ears. Though his high fever was the symptom given the most emphasis, the irreverent Keigetsu still assumed that, in short, the emperor had contracted some sordid type of dysentery.

“Tragically, even back then, the filth of dysentery was so widely feared that many turned their backs on the emperor-to-be. Why? Because catching an illness considered unclean would tarnish their noble standing? How utterly disrespectful.”

She averted her gaze with a sigh to express that she wasn’t accusing the Maidens before her. Her criticism was of those who had once declined to care for the emperor and no one else. Still, her implication came through loud and clear: *Disparaging someone with dysentery as “unclean” is the same as spitting in the face of the Supreme One.*

First, she’d used the empress. Next, she’d exploited the emperor’s influence. That appeared to have done the trick—Seika, Kasui, and Houshun all fell silent.

*Perfect.*

She’d disproven the theory that she was a man-eater based on the aphrodisiac. So too had she made her point that rushing to arson because dysentery was “filthy” would be an insult to the throne. In which case, there was no longer any reason for the Maidens to advocate for burning Shu Keigetsu alive.

Now was her chance.

“Lady Seika was right. You’re quick to make a scene, Lady Houshun.”

Keigetsu quietly rose from her seat and slowly circled the table. She strode gracefully ahead, glancing at Seika and Kasui out of the corner of her eye as the pair watched her with bated breath. Then, as soon as she was standing behind

Houshun, she came to a stop.

“Despite the show of tears, you made sure to stress the horrors of the illness, and you raised a fuss over a harmless joke about an ‘aphrodisiac.’”

*I won't let you weasel your way out of this.*

Houshun wanted to manipulate others with nothing but her words and pass herself off as a “kindhearted girl”? Not on her watch.

“The way you tell it, Lady Keigetsu sounds like a sordid, indecent woman. That makes me very sad.”

She dragged the words out slowly so that Seika and Kasui would be sure to hear them. Meanwhile, she called out to them in her mind: *Remember. Think hard.* Who had managed to turn the tides of the conversation under the pretense of sharing her own perspective? Who had influenced their opinions the most?

Who had driven “Shu Keigetsu’s” reputation into the ground?

Keigetsu took an untouched cup and gently pushed it into Houshun’s hands. “Could it be that you don’t like Lady Keigetsu?”

“No!” It was almost impressive how fast the girl looked up and turned on the waterworks. “I-I’m...sorry... I was just really worried about her...”

Her large eyes were damp with fright, and small ripples formed on the surface of her wine. By all appearances, she was nothing but a delicate, honest, and pitiful little girl.

“I was so upset that I started imagining worse and worse scenarios. You’re right... I did make a scene. I’m too quick to believe anything I hear... I apologize for making you so angr—”

“My apologies, Lady Houshun.” It seemed Houshun’s next scheme was to paint “Kou Reirin” as a bully. Keigetsu cut her off at the pass before she could start in on her pathetic apology. “I suppose I was taking things out on you.”

Her face twisting in sudden anguish, Keigetsu removed her hands from the cup. She wiped the corners of her eyes as though embarrassed before forcing a smile, giving her the noble look of a girl holding back her tears.

“You were just worried... I understand that all too well. I’ve been so concerned for Lady Keigetsu and my brother that I haven’t slept in days...”

She could sense Seika and Kasui whipping around to gape at her in bewilderment. It was an understandable reaction. *They* had only lost one of their fellow Maidens to the bandits, while Kou Reirin’s own brother had been caught up in the kidnapping.

“I’m sure those two are going through a hard time, and I’ve put such tremendous pressure on His Highness and the other clans to search for them. My heart was already aching, and then news of the illness came around last night and gave me another fright.”

Keigetsu blinked rapidly, making a show of fighting back tears. Breaking down into exaggerated sobs would only serve to put people off—she’d learned from her mistakes during the previous switch.

“I know they’ll make it through the dysentery outbreak all right. The Heavens would never forsake such hard workers as Lady Keigetsu and my brother. I’ve kept telling myself as much, but hearing you spell out the horrors of the affliction and denounce Lady Keigetsu over a so-called aphrodisiac pushed me over the edge...particularly since I was to blame for the ‘aphrodisiac’ part. I couldn’t help but lash out at you for bringing up these upsetting topics. You—no, *everyone* here has my apologies.”

“There’s no need to apologize, Lady Reirin.” Seika, who was soft on those who had won her respect, scrambled to her feet. She reached for the girl’s shoulder to give her a comforting, gentle squeeze. “We should have been more considerate of your feelings. You always put on such a brave face, so we didn’t realize how much you were hurting... Of course you’d be averse to such ominous talk.” Then she glared at Houshun. “Which is *precisely* why I tried to stop the conversation in the first place.”

Keigetsu almost had to laugh at her dramatic change of tune.

“I’m sorry, Lady Reirin,” said Kasui, likewise rising from her seat on the opposite side of the table with a meek look. “I was so swept up in my clan’s rage over the false aspersions that I seem to have lost my composure. It’s true that I was being too pessimistic about both the severity of the dysentery and

the nature of Lady Keigetsu's character. I'm ashamed of my behavior."

It must have been a shock to see the ever-composed Kou Reirin cry in public for the first time. Plus, no one could afford to make an enemy of the emperor or empress. Seeing that the tides of sympathy had turned in her favor, Keigetsu clenched a victorious fist on the inside.

"The 'aphrodisiac' must be doing its work. It seems we've all gotten a little heated." Keigetsu giggled awkwardly to lighten the mood, then inclined her head at Houshun one last time. "Will you forgive me out of consideration for the circumstances?" she asked, holding out a cup full of the aperitif.

"Of course." Without a crack in her squirrely facade, Houshun reached hesitantly for the cup, squeezed her eyes shut, and drained it of its contents. "I-I'm the one who should apologize. Thank you for excusing my rude remarks on account of the 'aphrodisiac'..." She took her last gulp of wine and looked up with her usual puppy-dog eyes.

Right then, just for a fleeting moment, Keigetsu caught a glint in those eyes sharp enough to send a shiver down the spine.

Once all four girls had rediscovered the delicious taste of the aperitif, the topic of conversation shifted to things like the delectable food, the quaintness of the township, and the traits shared by the southern territory's inhabitants—until, at long last, the tea party came to a close.

"Thank you for inviting us."

"It was nice to share a long, leisurely chat."

"Thank you very much, Miss Reirin."

The Maidens took their leave—some smiling, others with poise.

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Once the townswomen returned to their posts, leaving only Tousetsu and Leelee in the room, Keigetsu sagged against her chair.

"It's finally over..."

It was done. The realization flooded her with too much exhaustion to lift another finger. She felt a fever coming on from overworking her brain, and the

world spun around her. Had she ever made it through such an intense conversation before?

“I want a mooncake. Someone get me a mooncake. Plain bean paste would be fine too,” she mumbled, her head slumped back and a faraway look in her eyes. “No, I’ll even take honey. Go ahead and pour it right down my throat.”

A giggle rained down on her from above. “Oh, please.”

It was Leelee. She had reverently brought another cup of tea, her eyes shining like never before as she watched her mistress.

“Well done, milady. Today I learned there is indeed a villainess ranking.”

Keigetsu scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Since Leelee actually sounded polite for once, she assumed it was sarcasm. “Look, I get it. For all that big talk, I didn’t accomplish much of anything.”

She sat up, sipped her tea, and thought things over. If she were to assign this tea party a grade, what would it be?

For the time being, she had curbed the flow of rumors about “Shu Keigetsu”—or she was pretty sure she had, at least. She’d more or less threatened the Maidens that calling Keigetsu a man-eater or declaring dysentery an unclean disease would be an insult to the empress and emperor, so they’d be sure to think twice before recommending arson.

Less clear was whether she’d struck a serious blow against Houshun. She’d impressed upon the others that Houshun had raised a fuss over nothing to slander Shu Keigetsu and hurt *the* Kou Reirin, but for a girl who had been so well behaved to that point, that was little more than a minor setback. In practice, she hadn’t even shown a crack in her critter act. She probably planned to push past this with the angle that her cowardly, naive personality had worked against her in this scenario.

“I used the empress, the emperor, and the trump card of Kou Reirin’s tears, and this is the best I can do?” said Keigetsu, heaving a deep sigh.

That was when she made eye contact with Tousetsu, who had a tray in hand. “Lady Reirin would never put on as emotional a display as crying before the other Maidens,” was all the court lady said, her face as deadpan as ever.

“Right, of course.” Running a hand through her hair in frustration, Keigetsu supplied Tousetsu’s next words. “Well, forgive *me* for tarnishing your precious Kou Reirin’s image. I’m afraid I’m aggressive, emotional, and unable to fight without throwing someone else’s weight around.”

The more she belittled herself, the more the strange, self-assured euphoria that had raged inside her since the previous night faded, apprehension and fear creeping into her heart in its place.

*Was* that all right? Was that what she should have done? Was there a better method that could have overwhelmed her audience and struck a mighty blow against Ran Houshun, like how Kou Reirin had charmed a whole crowd with a single dance?

“I can’t do it the way Kou Reirin—”

“Correct. You aren’t Lady Reirin.”

That succinct response gutted Keigetsu to her core, but when Tousetsu placed a plate before her with a clink, she blinked. “What is this?”

“Mooncakes topped with bean paste and honey.”

Served atop a shallow pan were mooncakes loaded with huge globs of red bean paste, plus a generous drizzling of honey to boot.

“You handled this tea party splendidly,” Tousetsu quietly said when Keigetsu froze at the sight of the oozing nectar. “Lady Reirin never relies on the influence of those around her. She never depends on others. She never shows her tears. While that strength of hers makes her dependable, I have always feared that she might end up vilified were she to take on an opponent who wields weakness as a weapon. I doubt she would have fared well in this battle against Ran Houshun.”

Keigetsu stared long and hard at Tousetsu. Could it be, perhaps, that this woman had just *complimented* her? The unexpected turn of events hit her with a surprisingly intense wave of joy.

Afraid of the elation poised to wash over her whole body, Keigetsu limited herself to gingerly dipping a toe in the waters. “Y-you think so? Well, maybe you’re right. Kou Reirin doesn’t know how to play dirty.”



“You are weak. You are even weaker than Ran Houshun, and even less ashamed to show your tears. If she were in your position, Lady Reirin couldn’t have played the victim on the spot and drawn the sympathy of the crowd. It was your way of doing things that saved both Shu Keigetsu’s life and Lady Reirin’s reputation. No one else could have done it.”

“O-oh, is that so?”

Enough. How could the woman who had never once faltered in her stance of Reirin supremacy be praising *her* for having done the better job?

Not for an imitation of Kou Reirin but for acting like Shu Keigetsu.

And to even acknowledge it as something Kou Reirin couldn’t have done...

“You have my thanks for going through with this tea party, Lady Keigetsu.”

“Uh... S-sure.”

She shoved a mooncake in her mouth to hide what she was feeling. Though it ought to have tasted rather sweet, she struggled to discern its flavor. For all she’d longed to be acknowledged, praised, and rewarded, she just stiffened up uncomfortably the second it actually happened.

“The part where you slowly circled the table was downright menacing,” said Leelee, grinning as she drizzled on another helping of honey. “And the way you used both Majesties to tighten the noose around her neck? I had to stop myself from applauding!”

“That’s not a compliment.”

“That’s the number one villainess for you!”

“Stop that!”

Despite the retort, Keigetsu was helpless to stop a smile from spreading across her face.

Tousetsu’s solemn nod got her to sober up fast, however. “Indeed. ‘Answer the prick of a needle with a hatchet’ and ‘Speak not with insults but with fists’ have always been the ironclad rules of the Palace of the Golden Qilin...but I see there’s some fun to be had in this method of attack too.”

“I don’t need you awakening to any more terrifying proclivities.”

The day this court lady mastered the art of insidious double-talk was the day Keigetsu was finished.

“Still, I never imagined things would go this well. Three cheers for the most peerless, wicked villainess to ever grace the Kingdom of Ei!”

“Knock it off before I get mad, Leelee!”

“Yes, it was a stunning display of villainy indeed. Bravo, bravo.”

“That couldn’t have been more monotone, Tousetsu!”

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

“Who do you think you a—”

Keigetsu stopped short, whipping around to look behind her. *That last voice...!*

“It sounds like the tea party was a success.”

“Your Highness!”

The one who had announced his arrival in a deep, booming voice was none other than Gyomei himself.

“Nice job. I’m proud of you,” said Keishou, tagging along behind him.

“Keishou told me everything. Ran Houshun was plotting to paint you as a debauchee and sway popular opinion toward sacrificing the Untouchable Village, so you prepared a so-called ‘aphrodisiac’ in advance.” Upon spotting the bowl of fruit-filled grape wine left out on the table, Gyomei scooped himself a cup and tried a sip. “Oho. This is a tasty aphrodisiac indeed.” With a chuckle, he turned back to where Keigetsu stood stock-still. “You did excellent work, by the sound of it. Well done.”

“Oh...”

Keigetsu found herself lost for words. Since joining the Maiden Court, she had been met with nothing but scornful snickers and exasperated sighs. Never once had Gyomei given her such a straightforward compliment.

She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks. “Thank you...very much...”

“Had you called off the tea party with the excuse of feeling under the weather, the ill-intentioned would have been free to defame ‘Shu Keigetsu’ all they liked. So too would ‘Kou Reirin’ have come under fire for being so fragile as to cancel plans over a bit of heartache,” the prince pointed out. “I appreciate you avoiding either outcome.”

This was a startling realization for Keigetsu. She’d been so busy thinking about herself that she hadn’t considered the implications of the tea party for “Kou Reirin.” But he was right—bowing out the night before would have given others the impression that she was too weak-minded and unreliable to make a good Maiden. Now that Keigetsu had seen it through, she had instead demonstrated that Kou Reirin was capable of keeping the Maidens in line even in emergency situations.

*Hmph. So in the end, it’s all about Kou Reirin.*

She was a little let down to realize it wasn’t *her* Gyoumei had been worried about. Still, she was forced to admit that she was just as concerned for her friend as he was.

For that reckless, troublemaking, rampaging boar known as Kou Reirin.

What was she doing now that disease had ravaged the village and the flames of a purge were closing in?

*We need to send help to the village as soon as possible.*

Keigetsu quietly clenched her hands into fists and switched trains of thought. She had pulled off the tea party Gyoumei commanded of her without incident. That meant it was his turn to grant her wish.

“As you can see, Your Highness, the tea party was a success. I’ve done my part... Now it’s your turn. It’s time to make your move.”

Summoning her courage, Keigetsu stared up at Gyoumei. In most circumstances, the mere act would have her voice shaking with nerves, but she had Tousetsu and Leelee’s compliments and the sugary mooncakes to give her strength.

“This is a conspiracy, Your Highness. I’m certain of it. The Rans are the ones behind this incident. They used the magistrate to orchestrate ‘Shu Keigetsu’s’

abduction, and now they're planning to burn the perpetrators alive to keep them from talking."

She'd meant to cut straight to the heart of the matter, but Gyoumei didn't so much as bat an eye. Had someone else already informed him of the facts?

Thrusting herself toward him, Keigetsu carried on with her plea. "I heard from Lady Kasui. The ceremonial officers are calling to incinerate the Untouchable Village, aren't they? And you're the only thing holding them back? Even so, I'm sure Lord Koh will go over your head to see the deed done. That's part of the Ran clan's script too. This is no time to be sitting on our hands."

Gyoumei looked down at her with a cool, silent gaze. He was the sharp-witted, self-possessed crown prince. Even his irritation over Kou Reirin's apparent infidelity had lasted only seconds before he'd shoved those emotions aside, and that composure of his was making Keigetsu impatient.

"We need to put together an advance team we can trust and send them to the village before Lord Koh can make his move. We must rescue Kou Reirin, Lord Kou Keikou, and the Eagle Eyes' captain on the sly. We'll also provide medicine for the villagers and prove there's no need to burn their home to the ground." That was the best plan of attack Keigetsu could come up with.

Yet Gyoumei shook his head without a second thought. "No."

"Why?!" Keigetsu yelled before she could stop herself, the blood rushing to her head. "Why are you dragging your feet?! You're taking far too long to act. I know you regret letting your emotions guide you in the past, but you've become *too* cautious. Your Maidens are in danger! 'Kou Reirin' and 'Shu Keigetsu' both!"

Prior to the body swap of the Double Sevens Festival, Gyoumei—for all his strong leadership skills—had indeed let his temper flare from time to time. It was great that he'd decided to change his ways and conduct himself in a more disciplined manner as the crown prince.

But the way Keigetsu saw it, the new Gyoumei was like a lion robbed of its fangs. It sounded nice to say he was being mindful of the balance between the five clans, but all it amounted to was his fear of making enemies. What did a member of the imperial family have to fear from the Ran clan, anyway?

Even with his Maiden leaning in with a dark scowl, Gyoumei only gave a small shrug of his shoulders. “Listen to me, Shu Keigetsu. You want me to send someone I can trust, but where do you expect me to find a military officer who isn’t in the pocket of one of the five clans? The leaders of both my faithful Eagle Eyes and the Kous—the only other officers I can trust—are already on the scene.”

“Just threaten them not to betray you, or buy their—”

“So I’ll be the one to go,” he said before she could finish her rebuttal.

“Listen to me!” Keigetsu screamed. Then, the second she actually processed what he’d said, she furrowed her brow. “Wait, what?”

“I’m not putting together an advance team. Those scoundrels will be sure to march into the village no matter what we do. I’ll head over before they can set their fire,” he declared with no room for argument.

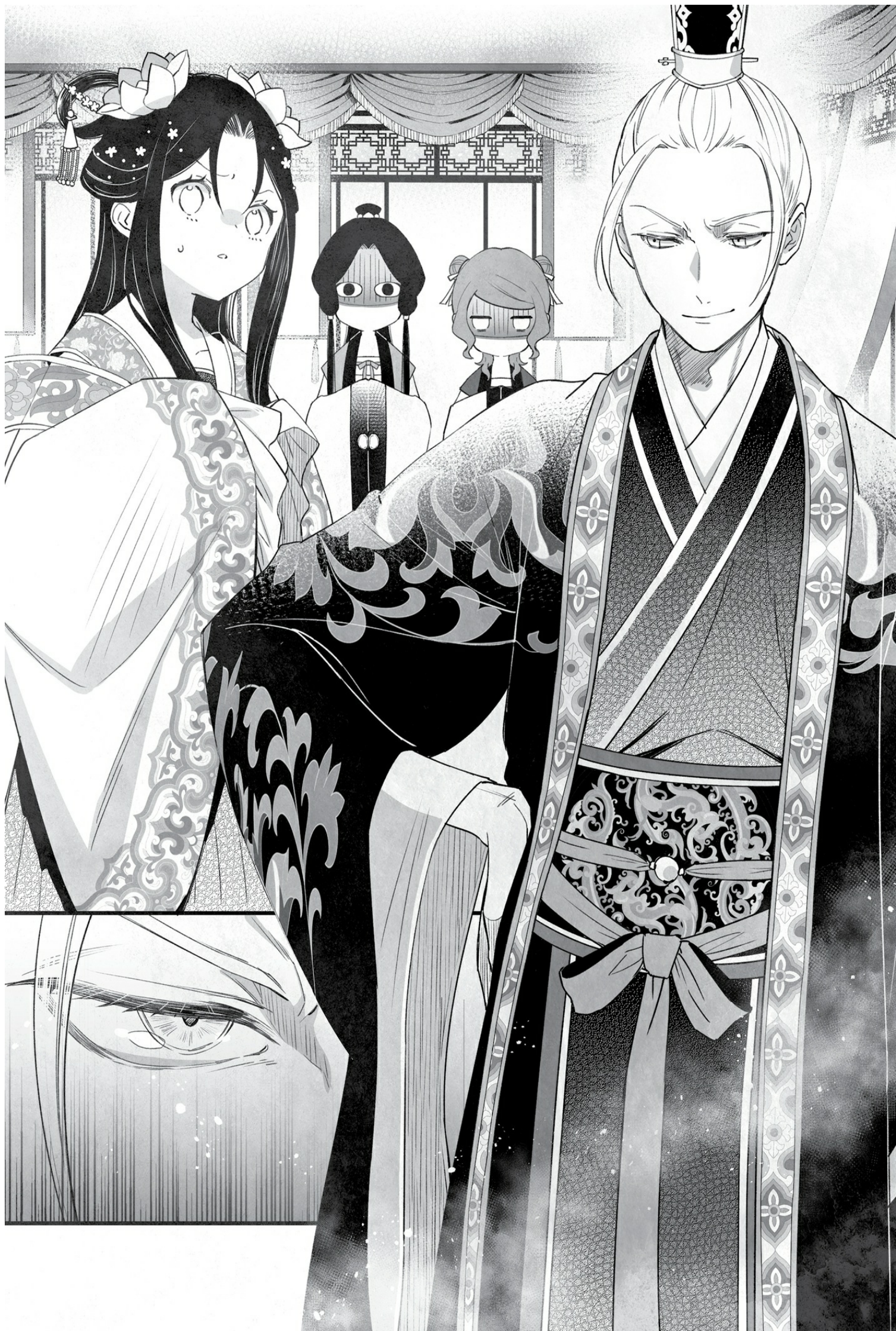
Keigetsu—no, even Tousetsu and Leelee—said nothing for three long seconds.

“Pardon?”

“‘The crown prince is too cautious.’ That’s exactly right. ‘One of his own Maidens was kidnapped, and still he refuses to make his move. I thought he was the impulsive sort, but he’s surprisingly slow to act,’” Gyoumei said as if he’d been reading Keigetsu’s thoughts this whole time. His lips tugged up in a smirk. “That’s what I was going for.”









His smile was menacing enough to send a shiver down the spine. As Keigetsu stood there, stunned, he reached for his extravagant crown and oh-so-slowly plucked it from atop his head.

“This has to go. It’ll only weigh me down.” Muttering ostensible nonsense to himself, he shoved the crown into the hands of Keishou behind him. Next, he removed his jeweled sword and resplendent fan, handing those over as well. “These too.”

Heedless of how the girls’ eyes darted around in confusion, he went on matter-of-factly. “If I were too proactive, the people inconvenienced by that would tighten their guards. If I instead convince them I’m ‘slow to act,’ their moves will slow down to match. Despite their clamoring to burn down the village, Lord Koh and the Gen clan have put off sending an advance team until tomorrow. It will take them a day to secure the live coals and oil they need and go around the mountain path.”

He glanced down at his densely embroidered outer robe. “I’m going to need this,” he decided with a nod, then dexterously folded it up and set it down by his feet. The next item to go was his dragon-engraved jade pendant, which he considered for a moment before shoving at Keishou.

Once he was done lightening his load, he turned back to Keigetsu at last. “So I’m going there today.”

“Huh?” Keigetsu and her attendants broke out into a cold sweat. “Umm, Your Highness? Why are you, erm...undressing?”

“I can’t very well cross the river wearing all these gaudy accessories. I thought that would be obvious.”

“Cross the what?!”

“The only way to outpace the team taking the mountain path is to swim to the village. Why do you look so surprised? You’re coming too, Shu Keigetsu.”

“Huh?!”

As Keigetsu flew into a panic, Gyomei stuck a hand into his topknot and tugged the cord free. He took the black hair spilling over his shoulders and tied

it back into a loose bun that just so happened to match Keishou's hairstyle. While he was at it, he snatched the man's ceremonial officer robe from him—and, at that point, it was clear he intended to pass himself off as Kou Keishou.

Gyoumei, now clad in ceremonial officer garb, tilted his head. "Your flame magic is bound to come in handy. The Daoist arts are quite the useful tool. Is there any chance you could switch my body with Keishou's?"

"Wha... Wh-wh-wha...?!" Keigetsu stammered, opening and closing her mouth as if she were a gaping fish.

The prince chuckled. "I'm joking. Your magic couldn't hope to breach my dragon's qi, and casting a forbidden art on a member of the imperial family would earn you a death sentence. Nevertheless...your flame spell allows us to communicate in real time, which should prove vital in tracking the township's movements as we infiltrate the village. Using Keikou's dove would have a time lag of a few hours at best."

"D-dove...?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"The man has a knack for taming animals," Gyoumei responded with a serious nod. "He went along with Reirin's kidnapping to find out what the bandits were after, then sent out a dove the next day. We've been communicating in confidence ever since, and it seems he's obtained evidence and corroboration of Lord Koh's fraud. Now that the enemy has slipped and shown their true colors, I can finally make my move. It helps to have 'Reirin's' tea party out of the way too."

"Evidence of his fraud? Corroborated? True colors...?"

Keigetsu didn't know where to begin with all the shocking information dumped on her in quick succession. *So Kou Keikou went with the bandits not to keep our swap under wraps but to find out what they wanted?*

"I only just learned of this myself," Keishou said with a sigh, doing his best to console the stunned Maiden. "His Highness and Brother are both so rude. If they were communicating by messenger dove this whole time, they should have told me!"

He went on to grumble about how quick older brothers were to form

alliances, which earned him a quirk of an eyebrow from Gyoumei. “You’re one to talk. I’d wager you quite enjoyed coaching Shu Keigetsu on how to pull the wool over my eyes.”

“Well, I can’t deny that.”

“Besides, telling the rest of you about the dove would necessitate more talks behind closed doors. Keeping too many secrets with the Kou clan might raise suspicion.” Letting the implication of the constant thought he gave to the equilibrium of the five clans stand, he turned back to Keigetsu. “The latest letter came in not too long ago. Dysentery was indeed making the rounds. Fortunately, they brought it under control with the help of some antidiarrheal herbs. There’s no time to lose—we must head to their rescue at once.”

“Huh? Isn’t that backward? If it’s under control, there’s no need for you to rush in,” Keigetsu argued, floundering. “Doesn’t going to the trouble of crossing the river seem excessive? Now that the situation is on the mend, Kou Reirin should be safe.”

Their arguments and positions had been completely reversed.

Gyoumei snorted at Keigetsu’s desperate attempts to stop him. “Don’t be ridiculous. If the situation has improved, it’s only because Reirin pushed herself past her limits.”

“I...”

It was quite the convincing argument. Keigetsu’s eyes went round. *Now that he mentions it, I can’t shake the feeling he’s right!*

As she groaned, Gyoumei took a step toward her. “Who picked the herbs? Who administered them? If the disease spread to the whole village, there must have been a good number of patients. Who’s looking after them as they retch and empty their bowels? Even counting Shin-u and Keikou, that means a mere three people nursed the entire population back to health. I’m sure none of them have slept a wink.”

“...”

“I learned something from the last switch. Reirin is appallingly unmoved by her own hardships, yet the moment someone she holds dear gets hurt, she can

become incredibly emotional and reckless. If, by chance, a favored villager of hers fell ill and hovered on the brink of death, I can only imagine how much despair she's feeling."

Keigetsu agreed with him on the pushing herself part but, frankly speaking, couldn't fathom the thought of Kou Reirin in despair. Not once had she ever shown a crack in her detestably easygoing demeanor—that was just the kind of girl she was.

Still, as Gyoumei closed the distance yet another step, she found her voice trembling before his imposing aura. "B-but...wh-what do you need me for? I don't know how to swim, so I'm afraid I'll only slow you down..."

"Don't make me repeat myself. I need you, Shu Keigetsu."

She couldn't count how many times she'd dreamed of the handsome prince whispering those very words to her in a fit of passion. So why, between the gorgeous eyes turned upon her and the fervor in his voice, did she feel nothing but the fear of one standing before a wrathful god?

"You'll be fine. Tousetsu is a Gen woman. It should be no trouble for her to swim across with you in her arms. We can have that red-haired court lady—Leelee, I believe it was—act as your body double. No one would suspect a thing if you holed up in your room after such an exhausting tea party."

When the prince cast a glance their way, Tousetsu shot back a solemn look, while Leelee replied, "Yes, Your Highness" with a pale-faced nod. Though the court ladies didn't have much of a choice in the matter, their immediate deference to Gyoumei's will had Keigetsu blanching harder than ever.

"W-wait! Isn't that plan a little too crazy?! That's right... Who will be *your* body double? A woman like me has the excuse of keeping to her room, but *you* have to be around to hand out orders!"

"Oh, don't worry about that." A slow smile spreading across his face, Gyoumei cast a glance over his shoulder. "As you may know, the men of the Kou clan are versatile entertainers. Isn't that right, Keishou?"

Upon hearing his name, Keishou made a sour face and sighed. "'As you may know, the men of the Kou clan are versatile entertainers.'"

“Huh?!” Keigetsu boggled. The voice that had left his mouth was indistinguishable from Gyoumei’s.

*“They’re great at impressions, animal taming, and feats of strength.”*

*Is this what she meant by impressions?!*

Only now did she understand what Reirin had meant by that in their road trip conversation...but she was pretty sure this exceeded the realm of a mere “trick.”

“There you have it—his voice won’t give the game away. We can have him hide behind a partition screen to avoid being exposed to the blight. That way, he can hold conversations without ever having to show his face.” Gyoumei shot the guard a look that said, *I’m counting on you.*

Keishou responded with a begrudging nod. “Understood.” Like it or not, he was in no position to refuse an order from the crown prince.

“Any other concerns?” the prince asked, turning a smile on Keigetsu.

Her face froze in horror. As she slowly backed away from him, she was hit with a strong sense of déjà vu. “Well, erm...I’d argue that it’s still too reckless for you to go in person...”

“You’re the one who scolded me for dragging my feet.”

It was the way he seemed to tune her out, only to use her words against her later.

“There’s no way I can make it across the river!”

“How do you know when you’ve never tried? As I said, Tousetsu and I will be there to help you through it.”

It was the way he brushed aside her every protest, like rolling a huge boulder down a bumpy road.

“But...but... Oh, I know! What happened to disciplining yourself to uphold the balance between the five clans?! If you let sentiment drive you to your Maiden’s rescue at the very last second, just as the situation is getting under control, all that hard work—”



“I considered that too, Shu Keigetsu. But you know what?” He closed in another step, his smile wider than ever. “To hell with patience.”

“Wha...”

It was the way he seemed so intelligent and composed, only to start rampaging like a wild boar.

“You’re right. I have repented of my past deeds, shown restraint, and thus far acted the part of the rational crown prince. Still, a person’s true nature doesn’t change overnight. If my butterfly flies off, I’ll want to chase after her, and if she gets hurt, I’ll want to protect her. I’m going to punch out her paramours and butcher her enemies. I’m tired of holding myself back.”

As she watched Gyoumei’s beautiful features contort into a savage smile, Keigetsu finally connected the dots.

*Oh... His Highness...*

It was common knowledge throughout the Maiden Court that Ei Gyoumei and Kou Reirin were perfectly matched in their gorgeous looks and elegant bearing. At first, Keigetsu had been jealous of that, but after learning what a free spirit Reirin was, she’d begun to doubt whether the pair was actually all that compatible.

However...

*When it comes down to it, they’re birds of a feather!*

Gyoumei was also a descendant of the Kou clan. He and Reirin were very much alike at their core.

“Now then.”

He took another step. Keigetsu’s leg bumped into a chair as she drew back on reflex, leaving her nowhere to run. Here she was, lucky enough to have the virile crown prince oh-so-reverently reaching for her hand, yet all that left her mouth was a tiny scream.

“Eek!”

The dragon’s qi she felt through his touch raged like a storm.

Then, bringing his lips to Keigetsu's ear, Gyoumei whispered what almost could have been a sweet nothing. "I'm not leaving things to Shin-u and Keikou anymore. You and I are going to cross that river and save all three of them."

## Chapter 3:

### Reirin Cries

**T**HE LIGHT SPLASH of a hand towel soaking in a tub of water filled the dimly lit warehouse.

“I’ve brought you fresh water. One tub for wiping you clean and another for drinking. Both have been boiled and purified, of course.”

The faint sunlight shining in through the window had turned into a weak twilight. Half a day had gone by since Reirin had stitched Unran’s wound back together.

Kneeling by his bedside, she said, “You’ve worked up quite the sweat. I’ll go ahead and get you clean.” She then wiped his forehead with a fresh cloth.

In the end, Unran hadn’t regained consciousness. He’d spent the entire day fast asleep in the warehouse, failing to drink even a sip of water. His fever was high, his breath came in gasps, and an agonized moan escaped his lips from time to time.

“Why don’t you have some water in a bit? It can be as easy as licking your lips after I moisten them with cotton,” Reirin said in a calm voice, not the least bit daunted by the bloody sight of his wound.

Brushing aside Keikou and Shin-u’s concerns, she’d insisted on being the one to look after the ailing man. It only made sense. She was accustomed to the looming presence of death. It would take far more than this to unnerve her after the number of close calls she’d braved. That was what she kept telling herself.

Besides, she knew that if she showed even the slightest hint of grief, her overprotective brother or the Eagle Eyes’ captain would drag her back to the township even if it meant slinging her over his shoulder to do it. Then again, perhaps that wouldn’t be necessary, given that the township’s envoy would be coming along to silence them soon.

Keikou and Shin-u had agreed to work out a plan to deal with the situation. They'd talked about needing to contact Gyoumei too. There wouldn't be an issue if the advance team were actually interested in checking on the village, but Lord Koh's men might use the disease as an excuse to set it ablaze.

Danger was imminent—yet, for some reason, Reirin felt a strange calm. Neither impatience nor fear welled up inside her.

With the dysentery outbreak slowly winding down and the sick returning to their homes, she had left Keikou and Shin-u to deal with the township situation while she staggered over to the warehouse.

“Hee hee. Speaking of water, that silly Gouryuu kept shaking like a leaf each time I offered him a bowl of medicine. He seemed to fear the very act of drinking. I wonder why?”

Brushing aside the bangs clinging to Unran's forehead, she carefully wiped his sweat with her cloth. Next, she cleaned off his arms, which were caked in mud and blood down to the underside of his fingernails, before gently lowering them back onto the straw mat.

“I gave the villagers who insulted you and showered you in stones a taste of their own medicine. In the most literal sense, that is. They deeply regret what they said earlier. They all told me how much they long to apologize to you.”

Her voice was tender, like she was a mother singing a lullaby. Reirin pulled a fresh new tub over, soaked a piece of cotton in the water, and gently brought it to Unran's mouth.

“Isn't it time you woke up, Unran? Apologies ought to be accepted.”

She gave the cotton a light squeeze, letting a few drops of water fall onto his lips. Alas, those never made it into his mouth, instead trailing listlessly down his cheeks and soaking into the mat below.

“...”

Reirin clenched the cotton in her hands. A few drops oozed from the material and hit the floor.

“Let's...”

A hoarse whisper rushed to her lips.

“Let’s do this with a bang.”

That was her catchphrase, and Unran had adopted it as his own motto. And yet, no matter how long she waited, he made no sound save for the occasional rattling breath.

“Isn’t that what you said, Unran?”

Reirin’s face abruptly twisted as some visceral emotion surged through her. It was soon caught in a thick membrane deep within and, rather than manifesting as a voice or tears, it thrashed and flailed in vain before eventually sinking back into the depths.

*I don’t have the right to cry.*

She dropped the cotton, clamping a hand over her mouth as her throat seized up. How shameful. *She* was the one who had insisted that those working to save others didn’t have time to cry. Worse yet, *she* was the one who had driven him to his death.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she clenched her fists tightly enough to turn her knuckles white. Several human silhouettes came into focus as darkness enveloped her field of vision.

There was Kenshuu, bedridden because Reirin had been helpless to stop the venomcraft.

There was Keigetsu, hovering on the verge of death after commandeering her sickly vessel.

There was the mother whose face she’d never known. The woman who had lost her life giving birth to her.

The three women moaned in anguish before collapsing to the ground.

A younger version of herself stared down at them. The girl turned her cherubic face to look at Reirin, her tiny lips forming the words:

*“It’s all my fault.”*

Reirin huffed and puffed like a bristling cat.

*Calm down.*

She had to take deep breaths. She had to throw her chest out, keep her gaze forward, and do things with a bang. In the past, she'd always managed to lift her head as soon as she recited that mantra. So why wasn't it working?

*I have so much more to do.*

There were preparations to be made. Instead of nursing Unran and spiraling into despair, she should watch for assassins from the township and help her brother and Shin-u devise a plan. Back when Kenshuu and Keigetsu were laid low, she had made the right choice to raise her head and fight. She just had to do the same this time around. Unran was still clinging to life, after all.

Despite realizing as much, she couldn't bring herself to move. It was as if her body had been sewn in place before the presence of death, more vivid and raw than it had ever felt before.

She was Kou Reirin. A Kou woman who remained unflinching even in the face of catastrophe. One who had tamed her fear of death after surviving countless crises.

*That's who I should be...*

Was it the influence of the fiery Shu Keigetsu's body at work? No matter how hard she struggled to fight them down, the flames of her raging emotions scorched her from within until she could barely breathe.

"Ugh..."

Reirin heard another bestial groan.

"You must be in so much pain, Unran." Instinctively, she leaned toward the mat. Her eyes were burning hot, and her voice trembled. "You poor thing. You poor thing..."

He must have been suffering. He must have been afraid. Gripped by an intense panic, yet still unable to move a muscle, he had no choice but to listen as the footsteps of Death crept ever closer. Darkness shrouded his vision, his breathing was labored, and pain seared through him. How terrifying must it have been for a man so young and healthy to experience the fear of death for



the first time?

“I know it hurts.”

She cupped his cheeks in her hands and gently brought their foreheads together. Her hair fluttered into Unran’s face. His skin felt burning hot to the touch, bathed in a clammy sweat.

“Is there...truly nothing I can do?”

For a while, Reirin stayed there cradling Unran’s head in her arms. His groans grew fainter—not because the pain had ebbed, but because he had been drained of the strength to make a sound. Even then, he writhed atop his bed from time to time. Like he was terrified. Like he was struggling to escape the terror of death. He was sure to be assailed by an excruciating enough pain to lose sight of who he was, enduring all that suffering only to die in the end.

The bleeding had stopped. She had readied herbs to combat any potential infection too. Still, if he didn’t have the strength to wake up again, there was nothing left she could do. All that remained was for him to suffer, ache, and die.

In front of Reirin. Because of Reirin.

She’d stitched up his wound, but all that did was prolong his suffering.

“If nothing else...” The smallest of soliloquies left her lips. “I wish you could have a painless death.”

The moment she put the sentiment into words, a dull alarm bell rang in the back of her mind. This wasn’t good. She couldn’t be swayed by *those* thoughts. It would only sadden the people around her. She had closed up his wounds to avoid doing just that. She had only held strong against the sweet temptation and made it this far because she didn’t want her loved ones to despair.

*But...I can’t do this anymore.*

The strength drained from her fingertips. With the rest of her body bogged down in the mud, her mind rampaged like a wounded beast.

“If only you could die painlessly,” she murmured again, staring down at Unran.

*“I want an easier life.”*

It was better to reach the end of the road quickly than continue trekking up such a treacherous path. Surely what awaited him there was a peaceful paradise filled with flowers in bloom. A bright and warm place devoid of sorrow or pain. If only it were as easy as slipping into that world in his dreams... How wonderful would that be?

Reirin sat up, relaxing her embrace. She reached into the breast of her garment and took out an item wrapped in cloth.

It was the dried and crushed remains of a blue flower and its roots: the lethal poison known as aconite.

*Did she go to check on him again?*

Upon noticing that Shu Keigetsu—no, Kou Reirin, the girl wearing her face—was nowhere to be found in the hut, Shin-u set down the firewood he'd gathered and glanced over at the warehouse a short distance away.

Up in the sky, the sun was cloaked in an ever-present layer of thin clouds, its emerging red hue announcing the coming dusk. It had been several hours since Unran had passed out, yet Kou Reirin had spent that entire time making trips back and forth between the hut and the warehouse, hardly bothering to break for food or water.

Even Shin-u was feeling fatigued, having slept only in short bursts since the previous night. A woman ought to have needed even more rest, yet she had stubbornly insisted on continuing to nurse Unran and monitor his condition. No matter how much Shin-u told her to rest, even as it devolved into him glaring at her or raising his voice, Reirin had refused to listen.

Shin-u couldn't believe how quick her brother Keikou had been to throw in the towel, forcing a laugh and saying, "Let her get it out of her system." The man wasn't overprotective of his sister—he was just her yes-man. If he really cared about her well-being, he ought to have dragged her away from Unran even if he had to put her in a grappling hold to do it.

*Either way, there's no saving him at this point,* Shin-u thought to himself as he recalled Unran's wound.

The Kou siblings had done an excellent job of stopping the bleeding, but he had seen enough deaths on the battlefield to know one thing: All that was left for that man was to suffer and die. Even if, by some miracle, he did escape with his life, he would never walk again. For a farmer who had to fight hunger and plow his fields day in and day out, that was as good as a death sentence. If Unran were a friend of his, Shin-u would have gone ahead and killed him as a mercy.

A lady would never allow that. For reasons that escaped Shin-u, the average woman's reaction to death was to shed tears and refuse to accept it. She would lose her head, shake the dying man by the shoulders, and beg him to live, then slump down in a daze the moment he was gone. He had to wonder why anyone would do something so pointless, but he supposed that was just in a female's nature. Knowing that even one as dauntless as Kou Reirin would inevitably do the same made him feel a tinge of pity for her.

No matter how brave a front she put up, she would fall apart as the shadow of death around Unran deepened.

He cast another glance around the hut. *I don't see Lord Keikou anywhere.*

Providing early and proper treatment seemed to have done the trick, as the once rapid spread of the disease had been almost contained. Several of the patients had gone back to their homes, and those who remained atop their mats were beginning to grab for their tubs less frequently, instead sipping calmly at their medicine. Given the current state of things, Keikou could very well have been taking a break.

*Maybe he's on patrol.*

It was also possible he was patrolling the village in anticipation of the township's cover-up operation. Whether the plan was to set fire to the forest or to rush in and attack the residents, their scheme was bound to require some amount of setup. Stopping it in the preparation phases was the surest way to protect the village.

Or perhaps he was reaching out to Gyomei by means of his favorite messenger dove.

As far as Shin-u was concerned, however, there was no reason to go that far.

The duty of the Eagle Eyes and the ceremonial officers was nothing more or less than to protect the Maidens. There was no sense in defending a bunch of villagers who had tried to take the law into their own hands. While he agreed that the township deserved punishment for ordering the abuse in the first place, that was the crown prince's call to make. If the village was indeed in danger of being silenced, then Shin-u's most pressing obligation was to abscond with "Shu Keigetsu" and bring her back to Gyomei before all hell broke loose.

Staring out at the setting sun, Shin-u heaved a sigh. It was getting to be that time.

By this point, she had no doubt been reduced to a sobbing, heartbroken mess. If so, there was no more reason to overlook the switch and allow her to stay in the village. Either way, it wouldn't be long before the area was plunged into mayhem.

*It's time to drag her away from that man.*

And after that, he would bring her home.

Having swiftly come to his decision, Shin-u headed for the warehouse.

"Now, this is strictly my own speculation..."

The door had been removed for ventilation purposes. When he caught snippets of a woman's thin voice coming from inside, he hid the sound of his footsteps out of habit.

"But I imagine there are all sorts of flowers and fruits blooming in Paradise. Everyone picks their favorite foods, smiling and listening to the beautiful music flowing from who-knows-where. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

The Maiden was sitting beside the mat with her legs folded sideways, gently caressing Unran's cheek as he suffered.

"Of course, it must be difficult to maintain such a spacious garden. I imagine farmers are given an especially warm welcome. That's why I've worked so hard to hone my gardening skills since I was a little girl."

Perhaps her soliloquy was meant to be laughed off. Regardless, there was an earnestness to it that was hard to pass off as a joke, and Shin-u found himself

listening in.

“Unran. You are both a skilled farmer and a noble-hearted dragon. I’m certain you’ll be treated as a guest of honor there. Please help the flowers of Paradise to bloom their most beautiful.”

She wasn’t crying. In fact, he could see a smile on her face in profile. It was a beautiful, serene...and breathtakingly unstable smile.

“I shall bestow upon you my favorite talisman of a flower. Please take it with you as a souvenir. Don’t worry—there’s nothing to fear.”

Her slender fingers plucked something from a bundle of cloth.

“I’ll be joining you soon enough. You go ahead first—”

She brought a sinister blue item to the young man’s lips.

The moment he saw that, Shin-u broke into a run. “Stop!” He slammed the Maiden against the floor with his full body weight.

“Eep!” Reirin gave a feeble scream, twisting around on reflex so as not to crush Unran underneath her.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Cap...tain...”

When Shin-u pinned her arm to the ground and tried to snatch the item in her hand, she immediately clenched her fist shut. He tried to pry her fingers open, but she tightened her grip, refusing to relinquish the poisonous flower inside.

“Give me that.”

“No,” she firmly shot back despite the full-grown military officer bearing down on her. “What on earth has gotten into you? This is aconite. It’s an herb with analgesic properties.”

“Only when it’s been heated and processed. Fresh flowers and roots are lethally toxic.”

As he shut down her argument, Shin-u felt a shiver run down his spine.

She had just attempted to kill this man.

She was neither sobbing nor distraught. She had tried to do the deed herself, without asking for anyone else's help.

All to deliver him from his suffering.

*She's strong.*

The shock of it shook him to his core.

*And...she's also dreadfully fragile.*

Shin-u couldn't get her comment about "joining him soon enough" out of his head.

"Just what were you trying to do? What were you *thinking*?"

"That...hurts..."

Kou Reirin wasn't like the other women he'd known. She was strong. When a loved one was hurt, instead of mourning or grieving, she planned to put him out of his misery.

Still, she wasn't the sort of girl who could kill someone and go on living without a care in the world. On the contrary, she was the sort to throw away her life—a Maiden's life—for the sake of just one lowly man.

"Did you plan to kill this man and follow him into the afterlife?!"

"Ngh!"

Once he'd pried her fist open with enough force to leave red marks, she finally dropped the flower in her hand. He snatched it from her and slammed it against the floor. Well, not quite—he was *tempted* to do so, but he instead chose to hastily stow it in his breast. He couldn't let her get her hands on it ever again.

"I'll be taking this."

"Give it back, please."

The girl began to thrash about in desperation, so Shin-u jammed a knee between her legs and held her down with his whole weight. The bottom of her robe hiked up, exposing the patrician porcelain-white of her shins. He pinned her hands with his hands. Her feet with his feet. With all four of her limbs



restrained, she struggled like a butterfly caught in a spider's web.

"Please. Give it back. Give it back to me!" She screamed for dear life, and that was when Shin-u knew he had made the right call.

He couldn't let this girl—Kou Reirin—kill Unran. She could kill someone in the name of deliverance. But if she did, it would break her.

"I beg of you. I wasn't planning to do anything foolish. I would never do harm to this body. So please—"

"So you planned to die *after* you'd undone the switch?" he asked sharply.

The girl gasped. "Captain..."

She realized he'd seen right through her. Her voice trembled, and the strength went out of her body.

Now that she'd calmed down, Shin-u looked down at her and said, "I won't tell you that killing someone to end their suffering is wrong. But that's not for a Maiden to do. Mercy killing is a military officer's job."

There was an odd clearness to her gaze. Shin-u stared into her eyes, which seemed to both capture him in her sights and look past him into the distance, with an air of plea.

"I shall become your sword, if you so desire. I will kill this man. So there's no need for *you* to hold on to this poison."

He didn't understand why he was getting so worked up. Falling apart in the face of death was the height of folly. He even believed it was best to kill the suffering, yet the mere thought of leaving this girl in possession of lethal poison struck him with an ineffable anxiety.

"I won't let you."

Indeed. Shin-u wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't let her disappear from his sights.

Just then, there came a breezy voice from the doorway. "Pushing my Maiden to the floor was a bold move indeed, Captain."

Shin-u whipped around with a start. He couldn't make out the man's face with

his back to the sun. However, as the interloper took another step into the warehouse, his stunning features were clear to see.

No—there was no need for a look at his face. Even disguised in a ceremonial officer's robe and dripping water from head to toe, only one man could stand so tall and noble.

“Your Highness!”

It was none other than Prince Gyoumei.

For once, Shin-u gasped and wore his shock plain on his face. “Why are you —?”

He realized the answer to his question as soon as it left his mouth: It was the dove. Upon learning of the village's plight through his correspondence with Keikou, the prince had rushed to the scene himself. Judging by the water dripping from his clothes, he must have crossed the river in secret, just as Shin-u had done the other day.

Noting that his unpredictable behavior had left the captain speechless, Gyoumei combed back his wet hair and answered his question. “I had reason to believe my Maiden was pushing herself, so I rushed over. Or swam over, I should say.”

So he had been right about that part.

It was then that Kou Keikou called out to Gyoumei from behind. He must have slipped out to meet up with the prince at the riverbank. “What should we do with the other Maiden, Your Highness? Tousetsu carried her over, but she appears to have fainted from the fear of making the swim.”

“Let her rest in a safe place.”

Keikou was carrying “Kou Reirin”—no, the woman who contained the soul of Shu Keigetsu—on his back. He'd taken her over from Tousetsu, who was also soaking wet.

Casting a backward glance at the limp Maiden, Gyoumei gave a small shrug. “I thought we could use her flame spell if we brought her along, but...in the end,

Keikou's messenger dove was faster."

Shin-u flinched at the mention of her "flame spell." That meant Gyoumei already knew that Kou Reirin and Shu Keigetsu had traded places. Was the emotion budding inside him all of a sudden...guilt?

"Now then, Shin-u," said Gyoumei, turning to his petrified half brother. "Step outside and find out what's going on from Keikou, would you? I need to talk to my Maiden."

"Your Highness..."

Shin-u called out to the prince on instinct, only to hesitate over what to say. Perhaps the first thing he ought to do was apologize for allowing "Shu Keigetsu" to stay in the village when he knew the truth about the switch.

*No, before that...*

Only now, as the girl wobbled upright, did he notice how disheveled her clothes were. Even if he'd done it to stop her from committing murder, his bold choice of action could lead to a misunderstanding.

*If he's going to suspect her of infidelity, I have to deny the allegations at all costs.*

Yet Gyoumei didn't shoot Shin-u so much as a look of irritation. His eyes were fixed on the girl who sat there in a daze. "This won't take long. I just want the two of us to have a moment alone."

"Your Highness." Shin-u was seized with an uneasiness that even he couldn't quite put a finger on. "I can explain," he insisted, thrusting himself forward.

"Shin-u," the prince cut him off, terse. The man in question straightened up on instinct, but Gyoumei didn't even spare him a glance. "Can't you see the state she's in? This isn't the time for that conversation."

Shin-u felt like he'd been slapped across the face. Gyoumei was thinking of nothing but the girl before him—of his beloved butterfly who had lost all semblance of composure and had no light left in her eyes. Releasing his frustrations could wait; he was just concerned for the emotional well-being of the woman he loved.

He was only thinking of how to save her...

Slipping past Shin-u, who was frozen in place where he stood, Gyoumei strode into the room. As he held out a hand to the girl who still sat in a daze atop the mat, he said, "I heard most of your conversation just now, and Keikou explained the situation to me. I'd like to think I have an idea of what's going on. Please, just leave us."

His voice was quiet but commanding.

"Yes, Your Highness." With that curt reply, Shin-u left the warehouse behind.

"Now then."

Reirin stared blankly at Gyoumei as he crouched down before her. All she'd wanted to do was release Unran from his suffering, but the ensuing storm of events had been so dizzying that she was no longer sure what was happening or what she should do next. This might have been the first time in her life she'd had so much trouble getting her thoughts together.

"What's the first thing you ought to do?" the prince asked, playfully putting a hand to her cheek.

"Your Highness..." she murmured, her voice small.

*Oh, right.* In the end, he'd found out about the switch. In that case, she had to apologize for breaking his rule.

"I'm terribly sorry for defying your ban—"

"No. That's not it." Gyoumei stopped her from prostrating herself, which left her at a loss.

It was then that she noticed the disheveled state of her robe. "Oh," she said, dropping her gaze. Although the guard captain had only meant to stop her from committing murder, perhaps the way he'd pinned her down had given the prince cause to doubt her faithfulness. If so, she had to explain herself.

"About what you just saw... The captain was trying to stop—"

"I heard you yelling at each other. It would take more than that to make me

doubt my own little brother and Maiden.”

Even *that* he casually brushed aside.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused with my foolish scheme to get away from you...?”

“Not that either. Though I do have a bone to pick about that one, mind you.”

Every single one of her apologies had been rebuffed. When Reirin wore her confusion plain on her face, Gyoumei finally gave in with a sigh. “Haven’t you noticed?” He then cupped her face between his hands. “You look terrible.”

He probably meant that as a comparison to her usual self, but the fact that she was wearing Keigetsu’s face complicated things. As she debated how to interpret his comment, Gyoumei stroked the skin under her eyes with his thumbs.

“Just look at these dark circles. There’s no light in your eyes either. Nor is there a trace of your usual smile upon your lips.”

He then slid his fingers down to lift the corners of her mouth. Her lips forced into an awkward smile, Reirin stared in silence at her husband-to-be for several long moments.

“I *did* smile,” she said at last.

“I see.”

“I didn’t cry... I kept calm and did what needed to be done.”

“Mm-hmm.” Gyoumei nodded his head—and then he pulled Reirin into his arms. “Fool. You shouldn’t have.”

Reirin froze up for a moment, failing to understand what he meant. Gyoumei’s clothes were drenched. His skin felt hot beneath the damp fabric.

“You’ve never felt so devastated, have you? You’ve never been so out of your depth before. Of course not. For so long, you’d given up on even wanting things for yourself.”

“...”

Though the low murmur of his voice was muffled by cloth, it still managed to

penetrate to the depths of Reirin's heart.

"You must have despaired at the sight of such a horrible wound. You must have found the pained moans of the villagers frightening—and you must have blamed yourself. 'Are these hands not enough to save them?' you thought. Or perhaps even, 'These hands are what drove them to this point.'" Gyomei tightened his arms around her. "I understand that all too well."

It sounded like he was trying to stifle something welling up inside him. He might have been seeing his own struggles as a ruler in Reirin. Or perhaps he was remembering how he himself had once hurt her.

Comfort washed over her as he spelled out the feelings she had struggled to process. Reirin blinked as the world that had once been shrouded in a film suddenly came back into focus.

Only then did it register that she had slumped against Gyomei. She was surprised to find that she had gone straight past hanging her head and was actively burying it in his chest.

*How disgraceful of me.*

She scrambled to shove her hands against him and push herself upright, but Gyomei caught her by the arm. Not satisfied to stop there, he even grabbed her head and shoved her face back into his chest as she tried to lift it.

"It's all right to look down once in a while." His voice rained down on her from above, and Reirin went stock-still. Gyomei slowly stroked her hair. "People are supposed to hang their heads when they cry. Yet you always keep your sights trained on something high overhead. There's nothing more beautiful than a butterfly aiming for the skies...but sometimes I get anxious that you might fly away and disappear." His calm, deep voice seemed to melt into his wet robe.

Reirin's brow furrowed just a fraction as she ruminated on what he meant. After all, that wasn't the person she wanted to be. She *had* to throw out her chest. The women of the Kou clan, the bloodline of earth, had to plant their feet on the ground, hold their heads up with pride, and look straight ahead. She'd come into the world on the back of her mother's life, so she had to prove that her birth had been "the right thing" by keeping the most brilliant smile on her face.



“Come. Look down every now and then.”

No. She had to lift her head.

“Trust me a little more. Lean on me. Let your tears flow.”

She couldn’t. She had to keep a smile on her face.

Still cradled in the prince’s arms, Reirin burrowed her head against his chest in refusal. He gave a small sigh, then slid his hands down to her cheeks and forced her to meet his gaze.

“You really are a terrible crier.” Staring into Gyoumei’s face from point-blank range, she found a rueful smile. “Listen to me, Shu Keigetsu. That’s who you are. You’re Shu Keigetsu—the temperamental Maiden of the Shu clan. Which means you have to wail at the top of your lungs in a situation like this.”

Reirin finally understood why he hadn’t alluded to the switch or called her by her name.

“Don’t hesitate. Let it all out. You’re Shu Keigetsu, after all.”

What a kind lie it was.

“Otherwise, I might grow suspicious. I’ll be furious that you disregarded my orders and went ahead with the switch, and I’ll lock you away forever.”

In that moment, Reirin felt as though she had been given permission.

To be weak.

To mourn.

To feel pain. To feel sadness. To feel hideous resentment for someone. To cling helplessly to someone—to take back all the problematic emotions she had long since relinquished or blocked out. All in Shu Keigetsu’s name.

“...”

Tears streamed down her face.

“I...”

A beat later, she let out a sob. She could feel the warmth of Gyoumei’s body through his skin, and that heat dissolved the taut, fraying strings of her heart.









“I wanted to save Unran... I-I wanted to...”

“Mm-hmm.” Gyoumei nodded along quietly. “Go on.”

“I wanted to let him be at peace...” Reirin choked on her words again and again. “I felt...so sorry for him. This is too... It’s just too...hard, too painful, too agonizing...”

How long had it been since she’d last cried in front of someone? She couldn’t remember. This might have been the first time. She thought she’d be able to hold a more coherent conversation, but she had just now learned that shedding tears caused the voice to tremble.

“He’s gripped by fever...and p-pain...while death draws ever closer. I’m sure... that’s very...” As she sobbed like a mewling kitten, fat drops of tears streamed down her face. “Scary.”

Surely that childish murmur spoke to her own feelings more than Unran’s.

*“It’s scary.”*

Gasping for air, Reirin went on. “Lately...something’s been...wrong with me. I used to accept...my lot in life...”

She’d never intended to divulge these thoughts to anyone. Too many emotions welled up inside her to explain in any logical order. She just kept on talking, scrambling to scrape the jumbled mess of words into something that made sense.

“I-I’ve just been having so much...fun. I made a close friend...did as I pleased... and laughed. But then...I suddenly got...scared.”

When had she begun to dread the nights she ran a fever? In the past, all it had taken to empty her mind was a little bit of training. Illness was just another part of her everyday life, and death was little more than a beast she’d tamed. Even as its savage fangs closed around her throat, she wouldn’t have flinched. She was confident she could have waited quietly for the day she died.

But the new “everyday life” she’d gained from the switch was just too glorious. There was Keigetsu, who was so true to her feelings; Leelee, who was always trying her best; and Tousetsu, who had come to wear her emotions on

her sleeve. The days she spent laughing with them over the silliest of things had become far too valuable to her to be described as a mere “treasure.”

Contrary to her heart, her body only grew weaker and weaker. The more Reirin valued her time alive, the nastier her fevers became and the greater her nausea grew, hinting at her impending demise.

Thus had her once tolerable fevers become unbearable. The anxiety she often felt when she went to bed at night—the question of whether she would wake up the next morning—had intensified to the point that she couldn’t sleep.

The sunlight she basked in was so bright that it had made her afraid of the night.

“Waiting for death...is terrifying.” Reirin buried her face in her hands, overcome. “I-I can’t...ask Unran...to suffer this pain.” Tears flowing freely, she shouted in a hoarse, gasping voice, “I want to...r-release him as soon as possible!”

Gyoumei pulled her close as she sobbed. For a while, he let her bury her face in his shoulder. He stroked her overheated back, combed a hand through her hair, and dried her tears with his robe.

“I’m proud of you for getting it all out there. I’m sorry it took me so long to come running,” he said eventually, keeping his head down.

The first he’d ever seen of Reirin’s tears were both heart-wrenchingly pitiful and inappropriately beautiful. Her teardrops were like gems. Still, she wouldn’t want him staring at them too intently. Thus, even as he held the drooping girl in his arms, he kept his gaze fixed on the young man lying atop the straw mat.

“Now, I’m not talking about *you*, Shu Keigetsu,” he said after some time, choosing his words carefully, “but I happen to know a girl who’s very sickly. Every now and then she breaks out into a fever high enough to kill her.”

“There’s no point leaving out her name...” Reirin mumbled. But when her own words reminded her of a conversation she’d had with Unran, she bit her lip.

“I care for her with all my heart. Whenever I see her delirious with fever and moaning in pain, it’s all I can do to stop myself from howling in distress. As I’ve watched her suffer, I’ve thought about putting her at ease...more than once.

I've thought about releasing her from her pain."

Reirin went wide-eyed. This was the first time she'd ever heard Gyoumei mention those thoughts. She hesitantly lifted the face she'd pressed into his shoulder. His eyes were still focused on the mat.

"Unfortunately, she's the only one who can know the extent of her own suffering. In the end, my desire to keep her by my side always wins out over my sympathy for her pain...and I can't bring myself to let her go. I take advantage of the fact that she never asks for a way out to keep her in my clutches."

His voice sounded small and ashamed. Reirin was fairly certain she'd never seen him so honestly admit to his own weakness before.

"But that's fine. Why shouldn't it be? Just as she is free to give up on her own life, I'm free to wish for her to live. So long as she doesn't earnestly beg to leave this mortal coil, I will never give up on her first."

Suddenly, he spoke with more force. He looked back at Reirin for the first time, peering into her face. "The same goes for you. You shouldn't give up yet. When did this young man ever scream for help? When did he cry that he wanted a way out? Look how far he's made it, holding strong against the pain that assails his whole body."

"But..." Tears welled up in Reirin's eyes once more. She blinked in a desperate effort to disperse them. "But, Your Highness... Unran no longer has the *strength* to scream."

Her throat quivered. She couldn't help seeing herself in Unran, and it was all she could do just to breathe.

"That must be so...awful..." She had to chew on her lip to stop herself from bursting into another round of sobs. But then she gave a blink of her damp eyes.

A smile spread across Gyoumei's face as he looked at her. "Say, why don't you take a look below you?"

"What?"

He grabbed her chin and forced her to look down at the floor. Reirin gave a

loud gasp at what she saw.

“Look.”

There was Unran, who she had assumed was still asleep on the mat right beside them.

“He’s fighting with all he’s got.”

The man’s brow was furrowed into a deep frown—and his eyes had opened just a sliver.

“Unran!”

“Kee...”

The mumble that escaped his lips wasn’t even a fully formed word. However, unlike all the groans he’d been making thus far, this one rang with intention.

Reirin spun around and clutched him by the shoulders. “Unran! Unran! You’re awake, Unran?!”

“Kee...p...”

“What? What is it, Unran?!”

She was desperate to make out the weak fragments of his voice. She brought her ear close to his mouth and held her breath, only to freeze upon hearing his next words.

“Keep it...down...”

*Keep it down.*

“Hee hee...” A tear slid down her cheek. In spite of how stuffed her nose was, she couldn’t help exhaling a long breath. “Hee hee... Ha ha ha!”

Right—this man was strong. He was quick to grow discouraged and desperate, but it only took him a moment to get to his feet and bounce back from the setback.

“Oh... My goodness, Unran.”

He was a ruler—the ruler of this village. Irrespective of Reirin’s presumptuous expectations or resignation, he was a noble ruler to the depths of his soul. She



had been a fool to think he needed saving just because he'd languished for a time.

Reirin quickly scrubbed the tears from her eyes, then turned her brightest smile on Unran. "We can't very well keep it down with a bang, now can we?"

Hope abounded. Right then, she felt like she could do just about anything. Turning to Gyoumei, who had quietly watched this play out, she straightened her posture and bowed her head low. He was serious to a fault and sometimes tactless. Still, she felt the need to show her respect to the prince, who was nevertheless several times stronger and more mature than she.

"Don't bother with that. I'm not looking for an apolo—"

Before Gyoumei could finish his charitable response, Reirin sprang upright. "I suppose not."

"Um?"

"You're right, a single Maiden's apology won't fix anything. I ought to let my actions speak for my gratitude. Just what I'd expect our magnanimous and practical prince to say."

Had Gyoumei actually said any of that? She had a feeling he'd said something in that vein. No, maybe he'd never implied it at all. It didn't make a difference to Reirin either way. More and more sparkling, bursting rays of hope welled in her chest, engulfing her whole being in a torrent of light.

"Um?"

As Gyoumei's face froze, Reirin sucked in a deep breath. She kept her gaze forward. Oh, how pleasant it felt to throw out her chest again after she'd spent so long looking at the floor.

Reirin put a hand to her chest and exhaled a long sigh. Then, in the most natural of transitions, she gave a snap of her fingers. When Gyoumei recoiled at the dull sound, she flashed him a mischievous smile. "Guess what, Your Highness? You called me Shu Keigetsu earlier, but I'm actually Kou Reirin."

Having such an obvious fact pointed out to him made the prince raise a dubious eyebrow.

His beloved butterfly's innocent smile grew even wider. "That means you've once again failed to see through the switch, making you the loser of our bet. As your penalty, I'd like you to do me a favor."

"Hold on a second."

"To be more specific, I'd like you to pardon everything Lady Keigetsu and I have said and done with regard to this switch, as well as lend me your wisdom and power to save this village."

"Hey."

She likely realized as much herself, but it was an incredibly greedy demand to make. Still, the sight of the girl he loved drying her tears and smiling so sweetly made Gyoumei feel more relief than irritation—and looked charming enough to give him pause.

"Please, Your Highness?"

This wasn't like the way she'd been clinging to him weakly just earlier. She danced her slender fingers along his shoulder in an alluring gesture, looking up at him with her best puppy-dog eyes.

"Won't you join me in teaching the bad men who hurt Unran a lesson they'll never forget?" she murmured with a magnetism more heinous than any villainess out there.

Gyoumei cast a silent, helpless look toward the Heavens.

## Chapter 4:

### Keigetsu Worries

I *THOUGHT I WAS DONE FOR*, Keigetsu grumbled in her mind.

Let's state that once more for emphasis: She had honestly thought she was going to die.

Her waterlogged hair weighed her down. Kou Keikou had been waiting at the riverbank with a set of hand-me-downs—apparently, he'd been notified of their arrival via dove—so she'd changed out of her wet clothes on the spot. Even so, she'd never spent so long in the water before, and her whole body felt the fatigue.

The Shu clan had a poor affinity for water to begin with. Even hot baths weren't a particularly relaxing experience for her, so crossing a river had been nothing short of terrifying. Though Tousetsu had been in charge of all the actual swimming, with Keigetsu merely clinging to her back, she'd been beside herself that whole time wondering when she was going to drown.

At last given the chance to sit in the shade of a tree, she slumped back against the trunk. Her current body was the absolute pits, so sickly that she'd had a bout of anemia as soon as she made it to shore. If she didn't watch herself, she was bound to pass out. She still felt dizzy.

*It's been a hectic few hours...*

Under the weak sunset, Keigetsu cast an unsteady glance around the shabby hovels that lined the village. The one right in front of her was the hut where the chief's successor was said to reside. It must have been where the sick had been gathered, given the crowd of men and women cradling tubs inside, plus several more people lying on straw mats outside. It was a grim enough spectacle to raise the question of whether the dysentery outbreak was truly under control, but according to Keikou, half of the patients had recovered enough to return to their normal routines.

Though the victims' immediate surroundings had been kept clean, the

cesspool area formed a short distance away gave off a vile stench. Her face frozen in horror, Keigetsu felt deeply grateful she hadn't been around to witness the peak of the outbreak.

*Has she spent all this time playing nurse in a place like this?*

As she leaned back against the tree trunk and let her gaze wander, she spotted evidence of caregiving here and there, such as an iron kettle still hanging over the fire, freshly washed tubs, and wet laundry set out to dry.

Evidently, the wounded son of the village chief was sleeping in a nearby warehouse, where Reirin had been taking care of him for a while now. Keigetsu had to qualify that with "evidently" because, by the time her team made it to said warehouse, she had blacked out into a light-headed stupor.

In her hazy vision, she'd vaguely made out a young man lying on a straw mat, with "Shu Keigetsu" sitting beside him and the captain of the Eagle Eyes grabbing her by the arm. Shin-u had departed the scene almost immediately, leaving Gyoumei and Reirin to have a one-on-one chat inside.

Near the hut, Shin-u, Keikou, and Tousetsu were wrapped up in a discussion of their own with grim looks on their faces. They were probably filling each other in on what had happened up to this point.

*Er... Things got rather complicated for all of us, I suppose.*

In her daze, Keigetsu reflected back on what she'd learned thus far. First, according to Gyoumei's explanation as they were crossing the river, Lord Koh had orchestrated "Shu Keigetsu's" abduction to hamper an investigation into his long history of crime. The township magistrate long renowned as a benevolent lord had, in reality, been falsifying the census in order to hoard his subjects' taxes.

Lord Koh had framed "Shu Keigetsu" as the root of the crop failure to divert the townspeople's attention, meanwhile offering Gyoumei a warm welcome for fear that he and his entourage might start snooping around. What's more, he'd attempted to keep the crown prince and military officers distracted by instigating a kidnapping during the event.

Unfortunately for Lord Koh, Gyoumei had found his behavior suspicious from

the outset. The buildings were rather large for a township of its purported size, and there were a good deal more townspeople than the population count seemed to indicate. When the kidnapping took place, he had chosen to leave the task of monitoring the bandits to his trusted associate, Keikou, who had volunteered to go along with them, while he himself looked into who was behind it all—the mastermind of the operation.

The magistrate had been oddly insistent on Gyoumei joining the investigation in person, and evidence linking the case to the Gen clan had emerged the moment he'd started inspecting the stage. Combined with all his existing misgivings, it didn't take long for the prince to figure out that the abduction had been carried out on Lord Koh's orders.

At the same time, there remained the question of how a mere township magistrate had come upon a Gen clan tassel. As Gyoumei casually kept an eye on Lord Koh, he'd observed what appeared to be secret meetings with Ran Rinki. Plus, from the flame conversation he'd just so happened to overhear, he'd learned that the mastermind had planted a Kou tassel in addition to the Gen one.

Unso and the Ran clan's eastern territory shared a mountain border. Naturally, his suspicions had fallen on the Rans.

Meanwhile, upon meeting the group at the riverbank, Keikou had provided information that substantiated Gyoumei's theories. First of all, the so-called "bandits" were untouchables who had been ordered to kidnap "Shu Keigetsu" in exchange for a reduction in their taxes. They had been tricked into believing that their Maiden was the source of the cold spell and the skies would clear if she was punished. This part Keigetsu had already learned via the flame call. In addition, Keikou had explained for a second time—this one for Keigetsu's sake—that the magistrate had stashed his gold in an eerie wood known as the Cursed Forest. This was hard evidence of his tax evasion.

The biggest reveal of all was that the source of the disease ravaging the village had been the ceremonial robe. This "sick gown" was part of a wretched tactic in biological warfare. The theory went that someone had instigated the spread of the disease by rubbing a contaminant all over the sash, then encouraging one of the villagers to bring it home with them.

The Kin clan were the ones who had prepared the ceremonial robes. Yet, based on the methods, Keikou had deemed the most likely culprit to be the Ran clan—the bloodline known for their intelligent and mild-mannered disposition. Of course, Keigetsu had also witnessed Ran Houshun’s suspicious behavior during her tea party and the night before it.

Judging by Houshun and Rinki’s shrewdness and resourcefulness, it was hard to imagine them obeying Lord Koh’s commands. If anything, it was the other way around: The Rans were the ones pulling the strings, having either blackmailed or enticed Lord Koh into doing their bidding.

In short, the true masterminds behind this entire series of events were the Rans. Thus had Keikou and Reirin, who had moved to the village, and Gyoumei, Keigetsu, and her companions, who had stayed behind in the township, arrived at the answer of the Ran clan’s involvement at almost the exact same time.

*This is so convoluted, I’m getting a headache...*

Earlier, Keigetsu had felt a sense of accomplishment from striking back at Houshun during her tea party, but it seemed the whole matter was still far from resolved. If the dysentery outbreak had been artificially induced, it was probably part of a plan to burn down the entire village to keep anyone from talking. Little details like the bandits leaving a letter or neutralizing the villager who attacked the magistrate had all been staged by Lord Koh himself. In truth, the “neutralized” bandit had been critically wounded by the magistrate and his men, but he had crawled back to the village on the verge of death to warn everyone of the impending purge.

Kou Reirin was currently immersed in taking care of the young man in question, Unran. That was also why Keikou had been the only one to come to pick them up. Thus had concluded the elder Kou son’s explanation, the slightest of clouds passing over his expression. More worried than ever as a result, Gyoumei had dashed all the way to the warehouse without even bothering to get changed first.

*And so Lord Keikou was forced to sprint after him. Since I was riding on his back, I was a second away from fainting by the time we reached the warehouse.*

As Keigetsu recalled the events that had brought her to the warehouse, she



soon found herself pondering the scene she'd witnessed on the other side of the door.

*Hm?*

With how out of sorts she'd been, the most she'd thought of it at the time was *Oh, there's Kou Reirin and the Eagle Eyes' captain*—but if her eyes hadn't deceived her, she'd caught the captain pinning her own body—meaning Kou Reirin—to the ground.

*Huh?*

All of a sudden, the gears in her head started turning at a furious pace.

*Wait, hold on a second. This is no time for me to be sitting here in a daze!*

Here she'd been dwelling on how they were still embroiled in a conspiracy, but there had been a much more pressing crisis unfolding right before her eyes.

*His Highness knows the "Shu Keigetsu" he saw is really Kou Reirin. He's pushed the limits of his restraint for his precious butterfly, worried himself sick about her, and rushed to her side knowing full well how reckless it was—only to find his beloved tussling on the floor with his half brother?*

The blood drained from her face. This was bad. All signs pointed to it escalating into full-blown drama.

*W-was it an affair? Did we catch them in the act? Or was the captain just trying to stop her from doing something crazy? No, forget all that, he just caught her red-handed defying his orders!*

Keigetsu almost choked. She'd learned from experience that the more the crown prince suppressed the violent emotion in his heart, the nastier the backlash was later. He'd seemed calm enough when he stepped into the warehouse, but what if he was actually livid and taking it out on Kou Reirin?

*She* would inevitably become the collateral damage in their fight.

With a gulp, Keigetsu rose to her feet. She had to find out what those two were talking about.

A quick glance in the direction of the hut showed the trio still sharing information with faces that meant business. Did that mean they weren't

worried about what was going on inside the warehouse? No, in hindsight, her spot on Keikou's back had made her the only one with a high enough vantage point to see past the door—aside from Gyoumei, who had been leading the pack. The warehouse was raised on stilts, so Keikou and Tousetsu wouldn't have been able to peek inside from where they knelt.

Still, one look at Shin-u's rather wistful expression gave Keigetsu reason to believe the situation was rather dire. It was just that he *always* looked like he was at a funeral, so it was a bit hard to tell at a glance.

Keigetsu tiptoed over to the warehouse.

*That blockhead better not be playing innocent and making things worse!*

As she flattened herself near the doorless entrance and strained her ears toward the room, she heard something.

"Scary."

Keigetsu froze upon hearing that feeble voice, so much like a child holding back her tears.

*Huh?*

She peered long and hard into the darkness of the room. There was no doubt that the voice belonged to the girl with "Shu Keigetsu's" face—Kou Reirin.

"Lately...something's been...wrong with me. I used to accept...my lot in life..."

Every now and then, a whimper akin to the cry of a small animal punctuated Reirin's words. Her voice trembled and cracked each time she was racked with a sob, making it clear that she wasn't used to talking through tears.

This wasn't an act. It sounded like she was at her wits' end, struggling to keep her own emotions in check. As she wrung out the words that waiting for death was terrifying, Keigetsu felt such a sharp heartache that *she* felt wrung out. She'd never seen her friend looking so weak before.

*This can't be happening...*

The glimpse she caught of Reirin's eyes from over Gyoumei's shoulder looked puffy with tears. That serene voice that had always filtered through a smile wouldn't stop shaking.

“I want to...r-release him as soon as possible!”

Keigetsu sucked in a breath when she heard that gasping cry. For whatever the reason, the words sounded to her like something else:

*“I want a release.”*

Shock was the only word to describe the emotion that coursed through her. She’d never dreamed that Kou Reirin had been hiding such desolate emotions all this time.

*I mean, you’ve always kept such a carefree smile on your face!*

Kou Reirin had struck Keigetsu as a graceful butterfly oblivious to the sufferings of the common folk. She was beloved by all, blessed with beauty and talent, and privileged in every respect. No matter what crisis came her way, she would not only sidestep it with a smile but also throw her surroundings into chaos with her bizarre aplomb. Whether consumed by disease or faced with death, she had always seemed utterly undaunted.

Keigetsu had been so sure she was just that sort of girl.

*“You don’t get anything! You’re always so calm and composed!”*

All of a sudden, Keigetsu recalled what she’d said a few days ago. Her lips pursed into a thin line.

*“Everyone else loves and protects you! You have no idea what I’m feeling!”*

Those had been her honest feelings, and she’d believed them to be the truth. Kou Reirin had always seemed so happy, while *she* had always felt so desperate and miserable. Convinced that difference was an absolute brought about by their status, their circumstances, and the blood of their respective clans, she’d believed she had no choice but to live in envy.

How wrong she had been.

*Kou Reirin was never truly happy...*

She had a man to whisper her sweet nothings. She had skilled military officers to clear all enemies from her path. She had been blessed with loyal court ladies, the ideal guardian, good looks, talent, wealth, and power.

Still, none of that could cure her ailments. Nor could it erase the fear of a fever that racked her body down to the tips of her fingers.

No one could take her place as she experienced the terror of a night that never seemed to end.

*She's...been fighting all this time.*

Kou Reirin had faced those fears all on her own.

In the Maiden Court, where even the slightest bit of carelessness would lead one to ruin.

With her head held high and a smile on her face.

“Unran!” Reirin suddenly cried out, giving Keigetsu a start. “Unran! Unran!”

Keigetsu couldn't help covering her ears at the flat sound of the girl's scream. Based on the conversation to that point, she had to assume the man had finally passed.

*Oh no. I can't stand to listen to this...*

Her movements sluggish, Keigetsu hung her head low. How deep was Kou Reirin's despair? She had been falling to pieces already. Having someone she cherished die on her was going to break her heart once and for all. Keigetsu shook her head furiously to rid herself of the image of Reirin sitting there in a daze, her innocent smile lost and her eyes like a pair of glass beads.

*I can't let that happen.*

She'd resented the calm and unwavering Kou Reirin for so long. Even now, from time to time, she still dreamed of stripping her of all her composure and sneering at her desperation. Yet the moment she actually witnessed the girl stricken with grief, Keigetsu felt like *her* heart was the one breaking.

“This isn't right.”

She was a butterfly.

She was nobler, more beautiful, and more blessed than anyone else.

She wasn't allowed to drown in the mud.

“You're supposed to laugh blithely from high up above.”

Keigetsu curled the hands she'd pressed to her ears into fists. Then she abruptly lifted her head.

*Revenge is the answer.*

She didn't want to watch the butterfly's wings droop as she sank into the muck. Kou Reirin was meant to flit across the flowers, far out of anyone's grasp, dancing gracefully over the people's heads. If her wings were frozen in fear and despair, she just had to warm them up—even if it meant relying on the flames of hatred.

*I have to make her lift her face, even if it takes the hope of revenge to do it.*

Never before had Keigetsu been so grateful for her soul's gift for the Daoist arts. With her around, Reirin was free to take her revenge however she pleased, unfettered by common sense. She could bring her enemies down in ways that defied human knowledge or law. Surely *she* wouldn't want to resort to anything illegal, but Keigetsu wasn't going to hear it. She had to boost her friend's morale by reminding her that there were still things to be done.

Emotions running high, Keigetsu burst into the warehouse in the heat of the moment. "Enough with the whining and crying!"

"Lady Keigetsu?!" Reirin whipped around from where she'd been facing Gyomei, likely in the midst of being consoled.

When Keigetsu saw how pitifully swollen her friend's eyes were, she spoke more emphatically than ever. "That body belongs to me, I'll have you know! Don't you dare go around sobbing *my* eyes out—it's hard to watch!"

"Um..."

"So a villager you'd taken a liking to was killed. So what? You're just going to abandon yourself to sorrow and be done with it? Give me a break. There's something else you should be doing. If someone stole something from you, it's time to take something even more precious from them."

Reirin's face was completely blank. Gyomei was also gaping at Keigetsu, eyes wide.

Thinking about it rationally, she had to be insane to intrude on a private

conversation between the crown prince and his favored Maiden. Even so, Keigetsu cast all courtesy and decency to the wind to scream her heart out. “Get back on your feet this instant, Kou Reirin! I’ll figure something out with my magic. I promise you the greatest revenge you could ever desire—if not even *greater*.”

She had to. She couldn’t stand to watch this—to see this girl so pathetically beaten down, sobbing like a lost little child.

“Even if you refuse, I—”

“You’re the best, Lady Keigetsu!”

When the girl sprang to her feet and snatched up both of her hands, Keigetsu nearly fell flat on her face.

“Huh?”

“Goodness. Oh, goodness gracious, dearie me! What wonderful, heartening words to hear! You’re amazing! You’re the bravest, most compassionate, most wonderful person in all of the Kingdom of Ei—no, the continent!”

“Huh?”

Why was she so full of energy? It was a good thing that she was feeling better, of course. Still...Keigetsu had expected her to put up a little more of a fight.

Starry-eyed, Reirin squeezed Keigetsu’s hands in hers. The look on her face could safely be described as “all smiles,” and something about it made the other girl break into a cold sweat. “I was having second thoughts in light of Unran’s survival, fearing it might be unethical to run too wild...but your speech just now blew all those silly doubts away.”

“What? He survived?”

“Not ‘an eye for an eye,’ but ‘all the innards for an eye.’ What a wise proverb indeed. Why, I’m almost trembling in awe.”

“Huh?”

Wait, had she said that? She remembered saying something similar, sure, but she hadn’t gone quite *that* far. Keigetsu made a casual attempt to extract her hands, but Reirin stood her ground. She even took it a step further and

wrapped her arms around her friend in a tight embrace.

“Oh, Lady Keigetsu! Thank you so much! To think you’d lend me your power before I even had to ask! You’re so kind!”

“Huh? What? Hey, I-let go...”

Why? Why was she in such high spirits? Just seconds ago, she’d been shedding tears and breathlessly confessing to her inner fear.

“Oh, I’m truly so grateful,” Reirin whispered so very close to Keigetsu’s ear.

There was enough ineffable threat in her voice to send a shiver down the spine. The two weren’t enemies, nor was this girl a bearer of the dragon’s qi, yet still Keigetsu found herself as paralyzed as a frog before a snake.

“Lady Keigetsu.” Reirin slowly rose to her feet. She was known to put a hand to her cheek in times of distress, but this once, she brushed those fingers against Keigetsu’s face instead. “Won’t you please lend me the power to trounce the very bad men?”

“Wh-what? What’s going on...?”

Though it was her own face, the way the girl tilted her head with a smile looked downright adorable. Yet the tips of her fingers channeled an almost electrifying determination, leaving Keigetsu’s knees knocking.

“Like a Shu Keigetsu to the flame,” Gyoumei mumbled, averting his gaze.

It wouldn’t be until a little later that she learned *he* had been the first to throw himself into the fire.

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Time flies when one’s heart is abuzz with hope. Having gained a new appreciation for this fact, Reirin set out a simple sleeping arrangement of a straw mat with a single robe laid out on top of it.

“Perfect.”

Beyond the paneless window of the warehouse where she was to sleep, the moon was cloaked in a thin layer of clouds. Night had long since fallen.

It had been several hours now since Gyoumei and Keigetsu rushed to the



scene. Time had passed in the blink of an eye as her two willing coconspirators, plus Keikou and Shin-u, had conducted a thorough information exchange and strategy meeting, then called upon Gouryuu and the villagers for help. The group had decided to get to sleep early to save up their energy for tomorrow.

The Supreme One couldn't very well sleep in a hut full of the sick, so they'd decided to have Gyomei rest in the warehouse where Keikou had previously been tied up. Shin-u and Keikou had joined him as his guards. Though the villagers were unlikely to attack Gyomei at this point, the warehouse Keikou had stayed in was the building closest to the forest. The men had been gathered there so that, on the off chance the "advance team" put together by Lord Koh and the Ran clan attacked under the cover of night, they would be the first to be alerted.

Meanwhile, Reirin had gone off with Keigetsu to spend the night in the other warehouse—the same one where she had stayed for a few days to treat Unran. It was the ideal place to sleep, seeing as it had already been cleaned to a shine, plus it allowed her to continue looking after Unran, who was still resting there. Tousetsu was serving as their guard. Ever the diligent one, she had volunteered to take the night watch, then planted herself atop a mat just outside the entrance.

It was a quiet night, only the occasional chirping of insects to be heard. Put another way, it was a peaceful night devoid of the groans or sobs of the ill. So too was it like the calm before a storm, everyone bracing themselves in nervous anticipation of the big event to come.

*It'll be all right.*

As she cast a glance out the paneless window, Reirin thought of Gouryuu and his neighbors sleeping in the village beyond. Then she gave a slow nod.

*Everything will go well.*

In addition to "Shu Keigetsu"—the intended target of their kidnapping—the Kou clan's ceremonial officer, the captain of the Eagle Eyes, and eventually even the crown prince and a second Maiden had all entered the picture. Gouryuu and company had boggled at the increasingly impressive lineup gracing their village. However, upon hearing that Lord Koh had been using the Untouchable

Village, that they were in immediate danger of being silenced, and that the crown prince and his dear Kou Maiden had arrived on the scene to prevent that outcome, they'd accepted the explanation with tense faces and pledged their full cooperation.

Their good attitudes and obedience had come as a shock to Keigetsu, who had been listening off to the side. "How on earth did you manage to tame them?" she'd asked, genuinely mystified. She seemed to perceive the untouchables as a cluster of criminals, so she had been surprised to see them exhibit such compliance and discipline.

Yet, based on the small talk they'd made with the villagers while nursing them back to health, Reirin's team had come to the conclusion that these people were not criminals but simply the *descendants* of criminals. It was true that the first people to be cast out to the village were those who had broken the laws of the township, but the population was thereafter made up of innocent people who just so happened to share the blood of sinners.

Despite that, Lord Koh had labeled them all "untouchables" and encouraged discrimination against them. By distinguishing their hairstyles and clothing from the townspeople, he had reinforced their lowly status and imprinted upon the villagers themselves that they hailed from an unclean bloodline. Some of them, like Old Kyou, had even turned to petty theft over the generations. Still, that wasn't evidence of a tainted bloodline so much as it was extreme poverty breeding a reemergence of crime.

The truth was that most of the villagers were superstitious and unaccustomed to going on the offense, so all it had taken to make them give up on the punishment plan was a handful of threats. If anything, a good number of them were very compassionate and dutiful souls. Thus, even when faced with the crown prince's unforeseen appearance on the scene or Reirin's sudden request for their help, Gouryuu and his people had adapted to the situation and agreed to cooperate without hesitation.

All to ensure Unran risking his life to warn them of the approaching danger paid off.

To come together as one to protect their village—for real this time.

*Hope is plentiful.*

The situation was as dire as ever: The outbreak was still being contained, and flames threatened to close in. Still, for a very different reason from earlier, Reirin felt neither impatience nor fear. This time, it was because the fires of hope were burning in everyone's hearts.

"I'm sure we'll be able to rest well tonight," said Reirin, first watching Unran in peaceful slumber, then smiling over at Keigetsu, who had laid out a mat next to her.

"Yeah...right... Not a chance..."

The girl in question was slumped over, her hands flattened against the mat.

Startled, Reirin reached out to her in a fluster. "F-fair point! I'm sorry. You can't be feeling well after crossing that river."

Keigetsu had covered quite a bit of distance in her current frail vessel, after all. Based on past experience, it was a miracle that she had held on to consciousness this long. She didn't feel feverish to the touch, but perhaps she was holding herself together through sheer willpower, just as Reirin did most days.

"You must be tired. I'll brew you some medicine. It won't be as potent as the usual, but this village has herbs that will do in a pinch, so—"

"No thanks." Keigetsu dismissed her offer, head hanging low.

Reirin blinked. "What? But you must be experiencing terrible nausea, no? And dizziness? Isn't your pulse erratic too? What about wheezing? A stomachache? Tinnitus? Oh no, don't tell me you're about to start vomiting bloo—"

"Why would I develop such serious symptoms just from crossing a river?! It's true that I was feeling anemic after being in the water for so long, but that wouldn't last this late into the night!"

So she claimed, but that sounded like business as usual to Reirin.

*Perhaps Lady Keigetsu's strong heart and fighting spirit have given her even more adroit mastery of that body than me?*

If that was the case, she was genuinely impressed. No one did it quite like

Keigetsu.

Well, all that mattered for now was that she wasn't in pain—or so Reirin told herself as she swallowed down her curiosity with a noncommittal nod. “I'm glad to hear you're feeling all right. But if your health isn't the issue, whatever else could be keeping you from getting a full night's sleep?”

“Right, right. Of course you wouldn't understand what it's like to be too rattled to sleep. Not with *your* nerves of steel!” Keigetsu spat in a sulk. Jerking upright in her bed, she began counting things off on her trembling fingers. “It's been one surprise after another, from the psychological warfare of the tea party, to crossing the river, to the big love drama, to spending the night in the village! Plus, since my flame magic is so ‘useful,’ I've been pushed to the end of my rope with experiment after experiment!”

Not long ago, Keigetsu had been forced to cast her flame spell in front of everyone so they could relay their strategy to Keishou, who had stayed behind in the township. Both Gyomei and Keikou had been impressed, remarking that it was much more convenient than a dove. The prince had taken a particular interest, ordering her to cast her spells under various conditions and confirming their potential uses until he'd had his fill. It seemed that witnessing a secret, taboo art had stimulated his intellectual curiosity.

“I-I'm sorry I couldn't stop them... But wasn't it nice to see everyone so fascinated by your magic?”

“Easy for you to say. It's just exploitable, that's all. And now I'm really in for it tomorrow...”

Keigetsu had a vital role in the strategy their team would implement the next day. Considering how poorly she handled pressure, she was a nervous wreck. Listening to her resentful sigh made Reirin feel terrible for her.

“I do apologize for foisting the most important task onto you,” she said, clasping Keigetsu's hands in her own.

Ever the contrarian, Keigetsu scrambled to shake her off. “It's fine. I'm the one who went off on you about getting revenge with my magic in the first place.”

Still reluctant to leave her gratitude unsaid, Reirin reasserted her grip. “Say, Lady Keigetsu. I’m so glad you offered me a helping hand back there...truly.”

Keigetsu looked down at her hands in bemusement, then gave an indignant jerk of her chin. “Sure you are. It didn’t take you long to get back on your feet after *Prince Gyoumei* made it all better.”

Reirin blinked. She hadn’t expected Gyoumei’s name to come up in the conversation.

*His Highness...*

She recalled how he had held her close. In spite of all her shameful conduct as a Maiden, like trading bodies or ending up on the floor with the Eagle Eyes’ captain, he’d listened to her quietly and never once gotten mad. He’d just pressed her face firmly into his chest with those strong hands of his.

*He told me to look down.*

Reflecting on his words, she felt something tight in her chest come undone. No one had ever said that to her before.

*I’ve been offered so many helping hands. So many people are reaching out to me.*

The thought tickled her heart as gently as a feather.

Feeling another rush of gratitude, Reirin forced Keigetsu—who had turned her head—to look her in the eyes. “It’s true that His Highness healed my heart. But the same goes for you, Lady Keigetsu. It’s not a matter of who was most important or who helped the most. Both of you played an equally vital role in getting me back on my feet.”

That was the unadorned truth. The first one to shine a light on her heart had been Unran, by pulling through his crisis, and the one to put her at ease and give her permission to cry had been Gyoumei. Finally, it was because Keigetsu had burst onto the scene and fired her up with a pep talk that she could sleep soundly, placing her hopes on the day to come.

She topped off her heartfelt confession like so: “You always come running when I least expect it, lighting up my heart. You really are my comet.”









Keigetsu gulped hard. Then, for some reason, she turned a misty-eyed glare on Reirin. “Well...good for you!”

For the clincher, she roughly shook off Reirin’s hands and dropped onto her bed with a thud.

Reirin’s face drooped sadly. “Um, Lady Keigetsu, must you act *that* offended?”

“Shut up. I’m going to sleep!”

“But you just said you *wouldn’t* be able to sleep... You’re so mean.”

“I said shut it!”

Keigetsu turned her back to Reirin. It seemed her mood was well and truly ruined.

Reirin’s shoulders slumped in dejection. *Why do I always seem to make people angry when I’m earnestly trying to express my thanks?*

The same thing happened when she had a moment alone with Gyoumei a little while ago. Shin-u had just come by to apologize for his assertive behavior in the warehouse. Gyoumei watched him take his leave, then said, “Now that you’ve calmed down, Reirin, I have something to—”

“There’s something I forgot to say earlier, Your Highness.” In a case of unfortunate timing, Reirin had dived into talking at the exact same time. “Thank you for taking the trouble to come all the way to the village. I’d always believed I could manage on my own, but when it came down to it, I was truly relieved to see you here.”

“Oh, that’s goo—”

“Indeed. You treated me kindly, without a hint of reproach for my selfish behavior. For instance, I’d argue that, no matter the circumstances, I was keeping far too close a distance with the captain earlier...yet you weren’t bothered in the least. I have nothing but the utmost respect for your magnanimity.”

“Right...”

“You’re so concerned for the public order and justice, while I was so small-

mindful as to fret over spurious allegations of infidelity. I'm downright ashamed of myself. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your generosity and the trust you've placed in me."

"..."

For some reason, the more earnestly she'd expressed her gratitude and respect, the less Gyoumei said.

"Oh, I apologize for dominating the conversation! What were you going to say?" Reirin had prompted him in a fluster.

"No..." In the end, he just turned his head and stared off into the distance. "It's nothing."

It wasn't quite right to say that she'd made him mad, but she knew she'd said *something* Gyoumei hadn't appreciated.

*This is hard. The human heart can be quite the difficult puzzle.*

She'd had that thought several times over the past few days. Just facing things with sincerity wasn't always enough, and sometimes there wouldn't be anything she could do right away. She'd spin her wheels and her heart would burn with frustration, only to reach an understanding where she least expected it. In the end, she'd keep reaching out a hand without ever giving up.

Even now, she placed a gentle hand on Keigetsu's shoulder, unsatisfied to leave her sulking. "Um, Lady Keigetsu? Are you angry? Did I ask too much of my precious comet?"

"Not especially. I just hate being stuck in this filthy, shoddy place."

"I *did* escort all the insects out, at least... Oh, was our meal the issue, perhaps? We didn't have time to cook anything fancy today, but if you'd like, tomorrow we can go all out and have grilled snake for breakfast—"

"No thank you!" Keigetsu cut her hesitant proposal short. She flipped over in her bed, stared up at Reirin, and then reached out to pinch her cheek from where she lay. "This isn't a sleepover!"

"Ngh!" Though the vicious attack brought tears to Reirin's eyes, she bit down a pained cry.

Keigetsu relaxed her grip with a dubious look. “Oh, come on, you could at least *yelp*. You really don’t have an endearing bone in your body.”

“Well, it’s just that if I yelp, the captain might barge in again. I’ve learned my lesson from last time...”

“That’s not the lesson you should have taken from that!”

“Awch! Dat hurts! Mah cheek’s gonna come off!”

Once she’d tugged with enough force that Reirin thought her cheek might split in two, Keigetsu abruptly let her go. “You ought to cry and scream a little more often.”

“Huh?”

She once again turned her back to Reirin, who had pressed a hand to her aching cheek. “Otherwise, I’ll look like an idiot for raising a fuss all the time. Besides...” Her face was hidden from view, but the ears peeking out from her hair looked just the slightest bit red. “If you break down out of nowhere, I’ll be too surprised to know how to react.”

Reirin went silent for five full seconds before she clutched at her chest. “You’re so cute, I think my heart is going to burst...”

She couldn’t help it. This was maybe, just maybe...no, definitely an admission that Keigetsu had been bothered—or even *worried* over her tears.

“Um, Lady Keigetsu? Could you say that again? I’d like to burn it into my memory, so if you could face me and say it one more time...”

“...”

“Come on! Please?”

“...”

No matter how hard Reirin shook her by the shoulders, however, Keigetsu stubbornly refused to turn around. Reirin clung to her, chanting “Please!” for some time, but she eventually gave up and put a hand to her smarting cheek. The pain had begun to subside, a tingling sensation spreading in its place. It was identical to how Reirin felt inside.

*I'm all tingly.*

It hurt, but it also didn't. It was hot, but not too hot—a warmth that gradually heated her from within. What a priceless feeling.

*I'm experiencing so many firsts.*

Her heart trembled. Her emotions swayed so easily, flipping between despair and hope fast enough to leave her reeling. Still, Reirin found that dizzying, dazzling world so very precious.

Outside the paneless window, the sky had turned an inkier shade. The looming presence of darkness lured Reirin toward fear. And yet, even without her talisman of that blue flower, she was no longer afraid to sleep.

The stillness of a humid night slowly blanketed the village.

Reirin's thoughts traveled to the people sleeping under their respective roofs. Then she watched as Unran slumbered peacefully in the same room. Last of all, her gaze fell to where Keigetsu lay right beside her.

*I'll protect them all. Every last one of them.*

Her heart was filled with a firm determination. That solid resolve became a pillar that shot straight through her core, lending her the support she needed.

A small smile rising to her face, Reirin lay down on her mat next to Keigetsu. "Thank you so much for everything, Lady Keigetsu—for running to my side, for offering to help me, and for holding a tea party on my behalf. Tousetsu told me all about it. It sounds like you did a wonderful job."

Keigetsu didn't respond. It was possible she had already fallen asleep.

That didn't matter. Folding her hands over her chest, Reirin carried on with her soliloquy. "I was shocked to learn the truth about Lady Houshun. If I had been there, she might have gotten the better of me. But you took her on without hesitation. You're a gallant sort who always gives as good as you get."

She could hear the steady rhythm of Unran's breathing. Outside, Tousetsu quietly huddled close to the door.

This place was in safe hands...and it was a place Reirin had to protect.

“You’re a truly proud person, Lady Keigetsu. You’re one who sticks to your principles with a fierce heart and enough passion to set your soul ablaze. I can’t tell you how much strength you’ve given me just by being yourself—so sincere and true to your heart.”

Her eyelids slowly began to droop. For the first time in a while, she experienced the fuzzy sensation of slipping into the world of dreams.

“Lady Keigetsu... Thank you.”

With one last tiny murmur, Reirin fell into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 5:

### Reirin Trounces

**D**AMP SOIL AND LEAVES slid underfoot. Having just narrowly avoided a nasty tumble, Lord Koh scowled at the treacherous path before him. The new shoes he had bought in preparation for the crown prince's visit were soaked in mud. The undertaking of traveling from the township to the village, which involved scrambling up a steep mountain only to head back down again, had taken quite the toll on the elderly fellow.

Given the option, he would have preferred to have the clans' military officers—who had joined his advance team as his witnesses—walk ahead of him and level out the path, but a visitor from another territory wouldn't know the right way to go. Plus, he had to keep them from accidentally wandering down the small mountain path he had forged a little ways off the beaten track.

Why? At the end of that animal trail, behind the bushes near the watering hole, was the cave where he had hidden his stash of gold.

When Lord Koh's gaze automatically traveled in the direction of the cave, the man walking right behind him read his mind and whispered a few words into his ear. "Nothing to fear. I have a few of my protégés from the Ran clan standing watch."

The voice belonged to the ceremonial officer of the Ran clan, Ran Rinki.

"Don't worry. Any idea *you'd* have at this point, I assure you my master and I accounted for at least half a day ago."

Ran Houshun's slender older brother wore a serene smile on his face. Still, Lord Koh could read a clear hint of disdain in the man's expression, and he wasn't happy about it.

*Oh, how I hate leaving my fate in the hands of some youngster who's never known the taste of hardship!*

To Lord Koh, who was still stuck as a backwater magistrate after his long years

of service, it was downright infuriating that Rinki had made a name for himself in the imperial capital at such a young age. It didn't help that, although he projected the outward appearance of a humble man, he was the sort who couldn't stand anything but the most preferential treatment. Without exception, all those who defied him ought to be burned at the stake. In his mind's eye, he stabbed Rinki like a pincushion and then tossed him into the flames.

Come to think of it, he'd felt the same way about that cocky, mouthy son of the village chief. He'd wanted to do worse than just shoot him. If he'd had his way, once he was felled with that arrow, he would have used the disease as an excuse to burn him alive; however, since Rinki had settled for stabbing him in the gut, he'd been forced to stop there to save his partner's face.

That was the limit of what the pampered son of a nobleman could manage, Lord Koh figured.

*But for now, I have no choice but to rely on him.*

He had to hand it to Rinki's devious nature and quick thinking. Without his help, setting the stage to silence the village, picking the advance team, and swaying the crown prince wouldn't have gone anywhere near as smoothly. Of all those feats, it was particularly impressive that Rinki had persuaded the prince, who had been dead set against burning the village, to agree to send out an advance team.

The ever-idle prince had hidden himself behind a partition screen as soon as he heard about the outbreak, probably to avoid catching the disease himself. He had invited Kou Keishou, the only one who had yet to come into contact with the untouchables, behind the screen to be his messenger, but he had otherwise refused to meet face-to-face with Lord Koh or the officers.

Despite the prince's deep fear of the illness, he had insisted against burning down the village in haste. While Lord Koh and the ceremonial officers had grown visibly frustrated, Rinki had been tenacious. He'd cleverly steered the discussion, letting the prince come to his own conclusion to leave the final decision up to an advance team rather than go straight ahead with a purge.

Seeing as his older brother had been caught up in the incident, Kou Keishou



had voiced doubts over dispatching an advance team at all, but once Gyoumei had given his permission, he'd been left no choice but to comply. Rinki had taken advantage of his reluctance and offered, "I understand why you'd be hesitant to let your brother die. To keep your judgment unclouded, allow the rest of us to determine whether he's been infected." Of course, this was to deny Kou Keikou a chance to tell him the truth.

Everything was in the palm of Lord Koh and Rinki's hands. Oblivious to the fact that the prince behind the partition screen had been Keishou's one-man act, Lord Koh was drunk on his triumph.

*Now, here comes the hard part. I have to play the part of the tragic magistrate forced to burn his subjects' home to the ground. Hah! That filthy village certainly proved itself useful.*

The forest gradually began to part, and the incline evened out. They had arrived at the village. The magistrate squinted at the rows of shabby hovels, a stark contrast to the well-maintained township. This was an unclean land. The people here were all poor, lowborn, and uneducated. But Lord Koh was quite happy to see that. No one would criticize him for burning down such a seedy, filthy place.

As he made the silent wish to watch the untouchables go out suffering, he announced with a solemn expression, "We're about to head into a squalid, disease-ridden place. The untouchables are hostile to authority as well. Please proceed with the utmost caution." Under the guise of a warning, he planted preconceptions in the minds of the ceremonial officers. "If the disease has truly spread beyond control, it's my duty as a statesman to purge this village. Yet, in my inexperience, I'm afraid compassion might win out and I'll hesitate to go through with it. I ask that you all see the facts as they are, put reason first, and correct me where necessary."

He made a show of defending the Untouchable Village so that the others would look more harshly upon it. Kou Keishou still seemed unconvinced, falling silent as he held up his torch, but Eishou of the vengeance-starved Gen clan was quick to jump on his remark. "I understand how you feel, Lord Koh. Be at ease. We're here to ensure you make the rational decision."

“Rational,” in this case, meant “ruthless.”

Eisen of the Kin clan likewise shrugged his shoulders in a show of poise. “Precisely. It would be a hard call for anyone to make—burning down a village with the Maiden of their own domain still inside.”

That was probably meant to be a jab at his phony support for the village. He was pointing out Lord Koh’s own oversight.

The magistrate responded meekly, hanging his head even lower. “The Maiden is the most supreme woman in all of my domain. If I’ve failed to protect her honor, I am truly ashamed of my own incompetence. But for that very reason, if the worst has come to pass, I must uphold her good name in whatever trifling way I can.”

He’d expected the ceremonial officers to jump on the prospect of torching the village the second he brought out the word “honor.” Instead, he found them surprisingly slow to react.

It was because the tea party had affirmed the Maidens’ view that it was too soon to resort to burning Shu Keigetsu. The girls each represented one of the five clans, and their opinions held a fair amount of weight. From Lord Koh’s point of view, however, a statement from a Maiden was nothing more than a bunch of nonsense. Politics were a man’s domain. That was the entire reason the advance team was standing there now, irrespective of the foolish women’s chitchat.

*Let’s get this over with.*

The main rite of the Harvest Festival had originally been scheduled for today. There couldn’t be much of a celebration with the hosting Maiden out of the picture, but it was still a good idea to dedicate some sort of ritual to the god of agriculture within the day. The villagers’ desperate exodus from the flames could do in place of the Maiden’s dance. The blood splattered over the sludge could serve as a substitute for jewels scattered over the earth.

“Well then,” he said gravely, pretending to steel his resolve. “Let’s have a look around the village.”

Leading the charge, Lord Koh took the first step onto the grounds.

Rinki had explained that he'd turned the sash of the ceremonial garment into a sick gown. Its small surface area made it easier to modify, and people would come into more frequent contact with it than the robe itself. His little sister, Ran Houshun, had made a point of stressing what a high-end item it was, thus enticing the untouchables to steal it.

It had been five days since the sash had been brought to the village. With disease spreading like wildfire via vomit and excrement, the entire population was bound to be moaning in agony by now. Would the first sight to greet them be villagers slathered in their own filth? Or would it be some poor victim getting turned into the scapegoat for their suffering and fear? Whatever the case, it was sure to be a truly gruesome, appalling scene.

Yet as he approached the heart of the village, Lord Koh frowned. Something felt off in a way he couldn't quite put a finger on.

*What's going on?*

Even as the rows of huts drew near, he didn't spot a single sick person. No—at the far end of the houses, near what appeared to be the chief's residence, there was a large number of mats and tubs laid out as evidence of caregiving. Still, those had been neatly stacked together, and it certainly didn't look like the hub of an ongoing epidemic.

Plus, there wasn't a trace of the waste that ought to have been strewn all over the place. He'd braced himself for a dreadful stench, but the surrounding air was crisp and fresh.

Above all else, there weren't any sick villagers around.

*Where are they?*

As Lord Koh's gaze darted back and forth, one of the ceremonial officers beside him—Eishou, whose Gen heritage had blessed him with superior physical abilities—muttered, "What's that noise?"

Kin Eisen strained his ears to listen. "It's less noise...and more of a song," he concluded after a few moments.

The song was coming from the direction of the rice paddies a short distance from the huts. Dubious looks on their faces, Lord Koh and the ceremonial

officers headed toward the source of the sound, only to gasp in unison at what they found there.

*Swsh!*

A bright vermillion robe dazzled their eyes. Past the footpaths between the rice fields was a dancing girl, her ceremonial robe fluttering to and fro.

“Wha—?!”

She looked almost like a celestial maiden in possession of her feather robe. If not that, then a butterfly spreading her wings. Upon glimpsing the face of the girl who boasted such superhuman elegance, the men had to doubt their eyes.

*Shu Keigetsu?!*

The girl gliding around in a dance was none other than the infamous “sewer rat” of the Maiden Court: Shu Keigetsu.

The stage was nothing more than straw mats laid out over the narrow space between the rice paddies. It ought to have been the definition of makeshift, yet strangely enough, it seemed to tower high above the ground. Perhaps that was owed to the large crowd of women and children gathered in a footpath one rice field away, their foreheads pressed to the ground as they prostrated themselves before the makeshift “stage.”

When Shu Keigetsu cast her robe into the air, the women of the Untouchable Village stopped bowing and sat at attention.

*“Spring forth spring forth O golden flowers...”*

Though they lifted their heads, their knees remained firmly planted on the ground. Clasp ing their hands together, the women sang a rice-planting song. Even this simple melody took on a mystical quality when chanted by such a large chorus. Many of those present were shedding rapturous tears and sighing in admiration, and the fervor that permeated the area was enough to cow even the seasoned military officers.

*“Come forth come forth O golden crop...”*

Behind the dancing Maiden was a small shrine. It was a crude structure assembled from stones, but it was flanked by rice stalks and candles. An

opulent sash was submerged in a tub laid out before it, perhaps meant to be an offering. The well-ornamented shrine had a unique air of solemnity.

“What on earth...?” Lord Koh and the military officers muttered, stunned.

This scene defied every last one of their expectations. The villagers were singing with perfect posture. Shu Keigetsu was dancing like a celestial maiden. Plus, past the stalks of rice that had shot up nice and tall, there was one more surprise waiting for them.

“His Highness?!”

The crown prince, Gyomei, who was supposed to be back in the township, was sitting comfortably upon a makeshift throne set up beside the shrine. His hair fell loosely around his shoulders—perhaps because he had no pages around to style it—and he wasn’t wearing his crown. Even so, his extravagant robe exuded the unmistakable air of a ruler.

*“Come be upon us O god of rice...”*

The villagers’ song rose to a crescendo.

Her vermilion outer robe discarded to expose a cream-colored garment reminiscent of an ear of rice underneath, the girl bent backward in time to the lyrics and cast a beguiling glance the men’s way.

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“I’d like to request your help.”

When Shu Keigetsu—or Kou Reirin in her form, that is—had first said as much, the villagers stared back at her blankly. This was inside the chief’s hut.

Their symptoms had begun to die down, and despite some lingering light-headedness or mild fevers, the consensus was that it had come time for them to head back to their homes to rest. That was when they heard a round of cheers from the warehouse, alerting them to the fact that Unran had regained consciousness.

Despite all the times the villagers had forced him to play the villain and hurled abuse at him, he’d devoted himself to nursing them back to health and ultimately even risked his life to warn them of the imminent danger. Seized by a

storm of guilt, every last one of them was relieved to find that he had woken up again.

Everyone had slowly gotten ready to head over to the warehouse, say a few words of apology, and then head home. That was when “Shu Keigetsu” arrived with about five people in tow and the sunset to her back to make her request. She asked for their cooperation.

“Of course, I’m well aware you’re still recovering, so I don’t plan to ask for the impossible. So I’d appreciate if—”

“Uh, we’ve got a question first...” It was Gouryuu and then Old Kyou, the first ones to get back on their feet, who cut off the enthusiastic Maiden mid-sentence. “Who, er...are those people behind you?”

“They look like pretty important folk from where we’re standing...”

“Oh, this is His Highness. And this is the Maiden of the Kou clan,” Reirin said without missing a beat, nodding her head.

In contrast to her nonchalance, all the villagers present jolted in surprise.

“Eep! I-It’s an honor, Your High—”

Despite how unaccustomed they were to the gesture, the villagers hurried to prostrate themselves, only for Gyoumei to stop them with a wry smile. “Don’t bother. Listen to what she has to say instead.”

“My apologies. It was extremely rude of me not to introduce you. Your Highness, these are the villagers who abducted me. Everyone, this is His Highness Prince Gyoumei, who rushed here to save us. And here we have my good friend, Rei—*Lady* Reirin of the Kou clan, along with her attending court lady.”

Now that she’d settled down somewhat, Reirin introduced both parties as a courtesy, but her overly direct and also deeply alarming explanation had the villagers quailing.

For example, the cowardly Gouryuu was shaking like a leaf, clinging to Old Kyou while he scrambled for excuses. “U-uh, a-about the whole abduction thing, um, there are some extenuating circumstances... I mean, er...”

The abducted girl in question—Reirin—cut him off, her tone mild. “Please don’t misunderstand. His Highness didn’t come here to punish you. He’s here to save you. That is to say, he knows the kidnapping wasn’t carried out of your own volition but rather was orchestrated by the magistrate, Lord Koh.”

The villagers’ expressions held a mix of relief and skepticism.

Reirin provided an unhurried explanation as the crowd broke into whispers. “By underreporting the population of the township, Lord Koh has been committing tax evasion—a type of fraud in which he avoids paying his fair share of taxes. He converted the leftover rice into gold, which he then stashed inside a forest he’d driven people from with tales of misfortune. That’s why the township was never provided the proper amount of congee, despite the imperial capital providing generous aid to regions suffering poor harvests.”

Old Kyou and Gouryuu gasped and exchanged glances.

“Lord Koh has long used you all as an outlet for the township’s discontent. That was how he planned to push through both the cold spell crisis and the congee shortage. But having His Highness come down from the capital for the Harvest Festival complicated things. He didn’t want the prince looking into his affairs too closely, so he needed a way to divert everyone else’s attention for the duration of the event. Thus, he landed on kidnapping Shu Keigetsu—me—amid the festivities.”

Before the villagers could break into a din, she went on in a deeper voice, “And, to keep you from talking, he wants to use the dysentery outbreak as an excuse to burn this whole village to the ground. A group of people purporting to be an advance team will be here tomorrow.”

“He can’t do that!” the villagers cried, on the verge of flying into a panic.

“Conversely,” Reirin said, her tone soothing, “should we show the advance team that you’re not only in good health but also working in harmony with Shu Keigetsu, Lord Koh will lose his pretext to torch the village.”

She took a step forward, her shoes clunking against the ground. Everyone stared back at her, forgetting to breathe.

“Let’s put on an act. You can say things like ‘It’s true that several people came



down sick to their stomachs last night, but it wasn't dysentery' and 'We did indeed bring the Maiden to our village, but we meant her no harm.' This performance will save your lives."

"But...there's no way that would work..." Gouryuu piped up from the paralyzed crowd, his argument bordering on a gasp. "If Lord Koh forces the issue, that'll be that..."

His pessimism brought a despondent look to everyone else's faces.

When silence fell, Reirin gave a tinkle of a laugh. "Don't be silly. Who do you think the man standing here is?"

Her voice sounded refined and beautiful. Yet there was also a sinister quality to her smile that made her look the perfect part of a villainess.

"He's the crown prince."

She spoke with the intensity of a military officer drawing his secret weapon, eliciting a gulp from the entire crowd. Nobody could take their eyes off the girl as she gave a slight tilt of her head and let her eyes roam over her audience.

"Now that we have His Highness here, our victory is assured. Let us exploit his authority for all it's worth. Let us tell falsehoods! An act of evil though it may be, it's the only way to protect those dear to us."

It was far from a virtuous declaration. Neither was it upstanding nor innocent. Still, it was filled with an odd sort of earnestness and vigor—and, above all else, it sounded beautiful.

"Ms. Kyou, I'd like you to assume leadership of the women."

"Huh?" Old Kyou, who had been watching the Maiden in rapture, abruptly snapped back to her senses. "You want *me* to... *Ahem*. Me? You're quite certain?"

"Yes. I want to show the advance team that the women and I have built a good rapport. It should impress upon them that I've maintained my chastity. You're one of the elders here. That makes you the best fit to coordinate the women of this village."

"Uh, all right..." Old Kyou was stunned for some time, but her head eventually

bobbed up and down. In the end, she emphatically consented. “Yes! You can count on me. I’ll make sure the village women do as you say.”

“Thank you very much,” Reirin replied mildly, then flicked her gaze to Gouryuu. “Next, Mr. Gouryuu. I’d like to ask the men—particularly those who have recovered most of their strength—to take on a different role. That means going off with the captain of the Eagle Eyes for a bit.” Her smile widened. “You *are* the second in line to become chief after Unran. You’d be glad to accept the task, no?”

“Eep...” A despairing moan escaped Gouryuu’s mouth as he looked back and forth between the smiling Reirin and the expressionless, ruthless military officer. Eventually, he squeezed his eyes shut and choked out, “I-I’ll do it. Of course I will!”

The next time he opened his eyes, they held a stronger light of determination than the man himself likely realized.

“Like it or not...this is our only hope of survival!”

“I’m delighted to hear it.” Reirin smiled like a flower bursting into bloom.

“Er... So what exactly do you want us to do?” Old Kyou sheepishly asked.

Reirin glanced back at Gyoumei. Once she saw him nod in approval, she beamed brighter than ever. “You’re going to help us mete out divine punishment.”

“Mete out...divine punishment?”

“Yes. You all know how the world works, no? Evildoers will be punished at the hands of the gods.”

The villagers nodded, befuddled.

Reirin looked at each and every one of them in turn. “I’m sure the god of agriculture is furious with those who would bring suffering to this village. Unfortunately, the flow of qi has been disrupted here. For him to wield his power to its full potential, we must first restore the balance of yin and yang. And since tomorrow just so happens to be a highly auspicious day...”

As the crowd stared blankly back at her, Reirin clapped her hands together

and declared, “We’re going to hold the Harvest Festival right here.”

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With a nimble stretch of her fingers, Reirin let her robe flutter in the wind before releasing it into the air. It was the same vermillion ceremonial robe that had once been covered in mud, that she had used in a stunt to intimidate the other Maidens, and that had been brought back to the village and hung on a separate shrine from the sash. After changing hands at a dizzying pace, it was finally being used for its intended purpose: “the Harvest Festival.”

Reirin felt the will of the Heavens in that.

*This will work.*

She wasn’t much for superstition, but she still got the sense that everything was coming together. The robe had made it back to her. The dysentery symptoms had subsided. Gyomei and Keigetsu had arrived on the scene. The once hostile and impressionable villagers had set their jaws and were all looking in the same direction—the stage.

Reirin cast a glance at the field of early-blooming rice that lay between her and the kowtowing women. They had harvested a single section of the rice plants, which had grown quite tall, then spread a straw mat over the gap left behind.

It was nothing more than a single shabby mat obscured by rice and women. Yet peeling it back would reveal all their hopes packed underneath.

*I just know it will work.*

Reirin reaffirmed her belief.

*“Spring forth spring forth O golden flowers...”*

The women’s rice-planting song rang out louder than ever.

*Ah... There they are.*

It was then that the advance team of Lord Koh and the military officers came into view. Reirin was swift to catch how they all took in her dance in speechless awe. Or rather, *almost* all of them—Keishou gave a mischievous wink as he held up a torch.

The fire was “connected” to Keigetsu via her flame magic, which meant all the advance team’s actions were being transmitted to her in real time. Keigetsu, for her part, was hiding behind the shrine in the center of the stage. That was the only place where she could coordinate with Reirin and Gyoumei without being seen by anyone else.

As Reirin danced past the shrine, Keigetsu whispered, “The advance team is here.”

*I know.*

Reirin responded with a silent nod, then concentrated harder than ever on her dance.

*“Come forth come forth O golden crop...”*

She had to overwhelm them. She had to demonstrate to these men that the dancer was adored and revered by her subjects—that the Maiden and the village women had forged a bond both pure and courteous, and their union was too strong for even a smidge of antagonism to break through.

Plus, this happened to be part of a solemn rite. Reirin closed her eyes once more, rid her mind of all distractions, and focused purely on praying for a bountiful harvest for the region. *Bring this land toward the light. Provide it an ample bounty.*

*“May you flourish...”*

Extending their hands toward the Heavens and ending the song on a faint murmur, the women prostrated themselves on the spot, overcome with emotion. This wasn’t part of an act; their fervor was the real deal. The men of the advance team just stood there, stunned. They seemed deeply confused by the spectacle before them.

“Goodness, what a surprise! Who would have guessed we’d come across Lady Shu Keigetsu performing such a splendid dance of offering?! The villagers are in perfect health and so reverently waiting upon her too! Don’t tell me everything Lord Koh said about the dysentery outbreak and hostile villagers was a lie?!” Keishou shouted in an awfully expository manner, helping the other men process the scene before them. The military officers gasped.

When Gyoumei saw that, he slowly rose from his seat. “What’s this? Not going to pay your respects to the main act of the Harvest Festival?” He cast a glance toward the women who were grinding their foreheads into the mud. “It would seem the women of this village have better manners than you lot.”

Startled, the officers scrambled to kneel.

Lord Koh, meanwhile, couldn’t seem to swallow his doubts. Though he also went down on his knees, he couldn’t help mumbling, “B-but, Your Highness... What are you doing here?!”

Shouldn’t he have been back in the township? Wasn’t it rash of him to march right into a disease-ridden village? His question held a hint of reproach, but Gyoumei dismissed it in the boldest manner possible. “I’m the crown prince. Problem?”

It was the most powerful declaration there was—one that robbed the men of all possible arguments, justified his every action, and eschewed the need for any explanation. If the need arose, he would fell his opponents with a single blow, even if it meant flaunting his status. It was an approach that truly evoked his relation to Empress Kenshuu.

As Lord Koh opened and closed his mouth, lost for words, Gyoumei flashed him a mocking smile. “I suppose I can elaborate a little further. Kou Keikou there reached out to me,” he said, pointing to the man in question.

“Huh?!”

Lord Koh whirled to see Kou Keikou suddenly sitting on his heels right alongside their group. For some reason, there was a dove perched on his shoulder.

“Hello there,” he said with a grin and a casual wave of his hand.

Gyoumei took advantage of the men’s stunned silence to rattle off an explanation. “He sent me a letter via dove soon after he and Shu Keigetsu were abducted. It said, ‘I followed along because it seemed like there was more to the story, and it turns out the villagers were in such dire straits that they were forced to kidnap a Maiden against their will. The benevolent Maiden has decided to stay here for a few days to soothe both the people’s hearts and the

land's qi. Therefore, I will do the same. Please keep this a secret and look the other way for the time being.'"

He went on to say that Shu Keigetsu had made the right choice as a Maiden concerned with public peace. It was also understandable that she wouldn't want the other clans to know about strife within her own domain. He'd decided to keep the matter to himself for a time and quietly supervise the search. Upon hearing that a dreadful plague had made the rounds, however, he'd lost his patience and rushed to the scene.

There were a handful of lies mixed in, but his confident tone made the story sound too convincing not to believe.

"As you can see, there wasn't a trace of disease to be found. It's already been brought under control. Shu Keigetsu won the villagers' respect and adoration with her steadfast efforts to nurse them back to health. Now she has become one with the women and is in the process of offering a performance to the god of agriculture. Once the Maiden has appeased the Heavens, it's my role as the crown prince to offer a prayer and restore the balance of yin and yang."

He leisurely turned back to the shrine. In a graceful motion, he gave a single bob of his head. Then he lifted the tub—which looked heavy even at a glance, filled to the brim with water and the offering of the sash—with both hands.

"Thus, we shall hereby perform the Harvest Festival rite."

"Wha...?!"

Bewildered as they were, the men soon realized all the conditions for the event had been met. Today was, in fact, the deeply auspicious main day of the festival. What's more, there was a shrine dedicated to the god of agriculture, an offering, a stage, a Maiden performing an art, kneeling subjects, and the crown prince who would be performing the rite.

The only thing missing was the other clans' Maidens, who were meant to elevate the rite with their prayers and banqueting—but, just yesterday, they had all gathered and eaten together to "pray" for Shu Keigetsu's safe return, so even that requirement had been fulfilled.

Gyoumei raised the tub high to the Heavens, then ordered the Maiden

kneeling beside him, “First, bring them the ritual water.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

When he quietly lowered the tub back to the ground, the Maiden dipped a ladle into the water. In the formal ceremony, all participants partook in the pure water offered at the altar, meaning the water in which an offering such as jewelry or clothing had been soaked and given the god of agriculture’s blessing. Here it seemed they’d substituted that offering with the ceremonial sash, the only luxury item on hand.

The Maiden solemnly scooped a ladleful of water, letting not a drop spill over the side. She held up the ladle with both hands, then announced, “Here we have fresh water, blessed through prayer, in which we have bathed the resplendent sash granted to us by the Kin clan. The villagers have already partaken of this water and recited their prayers. So too must the rest of us cleanse our bodies and souls.”

Her smooth recitation managed to convince everyone that this was the natural order of things. Though still taken aback, the military officers each took turns holding out both hands, accepting the water, and bringing it to their lips.

With two exceptions, that is.

“Oh dear. What’s the matter?”

The two abstaining were Lord Koh and the ceremonial officer of the Ran clan, Ran Rinki. Their faces had gone stiff, and neither one held out his hands to take the water.

“You refuse to drink the sacred ritual water?” the girl holding the ladle asked, tilting her head to one side. “Is this a defiance of His Highness’s orders to perform the Harvest Festival rite on this land?”

“No...”

Her mild question sealed off their escape route.

*You can’t very well drink this, now can you?* Reirin thought as she watched the men awkwardly avert their eyes.

As the ones who had planted the sick gown, they knew full well that any



water the sash had touched wasn't safe to drink. In reality, the sash had been aggressively sterilized through repeated boiling, and she had already brewed some medicine just in case things went awry, but Reirin had no obligation to tell *them* as much.

*We were right. These two are the culprits.*

Reirin leaned ever so slightly forward and said, "Then why won't you drink it? Could it be—"

The moment she opened her mouth, she saw Rinki exhale a long breath and lift his head. He took a large stride forward, leaving Lord Koh behind.

*Huh?* Reirin blinked.

Then, he did the unexpected.

"If you'll forgive me for saying so..."

He kneeled on the spot and bowed his head low.

"I hesitated because I was afraid to drink unboiled water from an area where disease has run rampant. You see, my experiences on the battlefield have granted me more knowledge of disease and sanitation than the average person."

His response was smooth and unfaltering, as befitting one with his intelligent countenance.

Before Reirin could get in a word edgewise, he smoothly rose to his feet and held out both hands. "But in the face of a sacred ritual, common sense is little more than cowardice. Though I've already been so foolish as to show you my spineless side, might you allow me some of this ritual water as well?"

While he played at being ashamed of his own cowardice, he was actually criticizing the Maiden for lacking the "common sense" not to offer them unclean water.

Would she rise to the provocation? If nothing else, Reirin had no intention of backing down now.

"Of course," she said, pouring a generous helping of water into his waiting palms.

“Thank you for your blessing.”

She'd thought there was a chance he was just bluffing, but Rinki cast her a taunting look before slowly gulping down the water.

*He's prepared to accept the consequences.*

Or, being the instigator, was he in possession of an antidote?

Lord Koh, on the other hand, observed this with so much distress that his eyes nearly popped out of his skull. “Lord Rinki?! Have you lost your mind?!”

“Of course not. Why are *you* so upset, Lord Koh?” When the magistrate reached out to shake him by the shoulders, he gently pulled back with a look of bemusement. “Is there a reason you're so set against drinking this water?”

“Wha...?!” Lord Koh was lost for words, his consternation clear. Of course he was. The partner he had been in perfect step with all this time had abruptly thrown him to the wolves. “W-well...”

Evidently unequipped to cope with the unexpected, Lord Koh did nothing but glare at Reirin and Rinki in turn. His best move would have been to follow his partner's example and drink the water, but he lacked the courage. His cowardice was his own undoing.

“I must say...you've been behaving strangely the past few days,” said Rinki, managing to sound contemplative for all his shamelessness. Much more confident now that he'd had a drink of the water, he called attention to the magistrate's suspicious behavior. “Frankly, I've felt something was off ever since we received that letter from the village. Why would the untouchables, who aren't supposed to know how to read or write, communicate with letters? Why turn to us military officers for help and no one else?”

“You...!” Lord Koh looked livid. Still, the casual observer would have no way to know whether that was a result of being betrayed or being caught in the act.

Rinki solemnly went on, “I've refrained from saying anything, thinking it boorish to throw around accusations without proof...but the handwriting on the letter was very similar to the *Thousand Character Classic* you offered at the altar.”

The way he rattled on and on left Lord Koh no opening to protest his accusations.

“Plus, during the negotiations with the bandits, you killed the chief’s son mid-sentence as he was attesting to his plight, even though I was holding him back. You claimed it was to keep him from bringing disease into the township, so I went along with it...but the truth is that you just wanted to keep him from talking, didn’t you?”

Cutting off Lord Koh as he opened his mouth to speak, Rinki suddenly turned around and pointed to the sash soaking in the tub. “It’s suspicious that you’d be so hesitant to drink the water. It’s almost like you’re afraid that the sash has somehow poisoned it.”

The implication of his words made the Kin and Gen ceremonial officers gasp in a flash of insight.

“The sash...poisoned the water?”

“Is it a sick gown? Is that what you’re implying?”

Rinki gave a silent shrug, declining to give a straight answer. That was more than enough for the military officers to eye the magistrate with suspicion. It would certainly explain why he had been so adamant about not drinking the water.

“H-how... How dare you...”

With all these accusations hurled at him, Lord Koh shot Rinki a look that could kill. Still, he didn’t seem to be in a position to retort, “You’re the one who told me to do it!” Of course not, since that would mean confessing to his own involvement in the case.

At this rate, he was going to end up taking all the blame. Realizing as much, Lord Koh whirled on “Shu Keigetsu” and groveled at her feet. “He’s lying! Please don’t believe him. All I did was hesitate to drink water! Why should a virtuous, miserable old manservant like myself see such aspersions cast at him over that?!”

He was the picture of desperation. He clung to the Maiden, his spit flying in her face.

“This is an unclean village. The water may have been tainted with the urine and feces of undesirables who carry revolting disease. Isn’t it natural I would hesitate to drink it? That’s all there was to it!”

“ ... ”

“Please believe me. I have pledged my utmost allegiance to His Highness and his Maidens. That’s why I’ve been working myself to the bone to purge these dirty rats as soon as possible—to ensure that you esteemed dignitaries won’t be exposed to their filth! Don’t you see?!”

Despite all his efforts to play the magistrate sympathetic to even the untouchables, he no longer had the leeway to keep up the act.

Shu Keigetsu—that is, Kou Reirin in her form—watched as Lord Koh worked himself into a lather. “It’s always ‘rats,’ isn’t it?” she mumbled before she could stop herself.

There was Keigetsu, crying before a robe smeared in mud. There was Unran, tears welling in his eyes after being called a half blood. There were the villagers, clenching their fists to endure the cruel label of “untouchables.” As their faces popped into her mind one after another, Reirin felt a heat well in the back of her throat.

It was a fury violent enough to set her heart ablaze.

*No. I mustn’t let this feeling control me.*

This was the first time she’d ever identified such a fierce rage in herself. As she’d never built a tolerance, it rampaged through her like wildfire.

*I need to cool my head.*

She had to stay calm. Stay cool. Telling herself that, she splashed water from the ladle...right onto Lord Koh’s head.

“Oops. My hand slipped.”

“Eep!” The man blanched and scrambled to wipe the water from his face.

*So much for that. It was impossible to hold it in.*

Reirin immediately gave up on restraint and dropped the ladle. She’d always

thought her earthen properties made her a mellow sort, but it seemed she'd been wrong.

"My, you're in quite the panic. Well, I suppose dysentery would be very hard on a man your age."

When she took a step toward him, Lord Koh gave a visible start.

Hearing him gulp, Reirin fixed her eyes on him and said, "Indeed. As you all have guessed, the source of the village's dysentery outbreak was this sash. A certain someone smeared it in mud and a contaminant, then encouraged one of the villagers to bring it home. It's a sick robe."

The ceremonial officers gasped.

"That sash was tailored by the Kin clan. Then...the Kins did this?" Gen Eishou said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Kin Eisen snapped. "What cause would we have to attack a southern village? Besides, if it were our plan, Lord Koh would have no reason to keep quiet about it."

"Fair point... But what about Lord Koh himself? What reason would *he* have to spread disease among his own people?"

"I have an idea," Ran Rinki interjected from beside them. "Though he feigned reluctance, Lord Koh was the first to bring up torching the village. Perhaps spreading the disease was just a means toward his true goal of setting the village ablaze?"

His game was likely to bring Lord Koh's tax evasion to light and quickly establish his guilt. Rinki had no doubt done a skillful job of erasing all the evidence—or, if nothing else, leaving only the things that pointed to Lord Koh. Hence, he was free to come out and denounce him.

"Perhaps so. We came to the same conclusion after hearing what the villagers had to say. Lord Koh wanted to burn this village to the ground to keep anyone from talking," said Reirin, staring back at Rinki—at the despicably earnest look he wore as he stood back and watched from a safe distance. "Everyone testified to the fact that Lord Koh ordered this kidnapping. We even have a contract to prove it."

Lord Koh erupted into a wheezing fit, while Rinki remained calm and composed. Even if the contract was brought out as evidence, it would only incriminate the magistrate.

“Let’s have a look for ourselves.”

Peeling her gaze from Rinki, Reirin took a step forward. She slipped past the astonished ceremonial officers toward the field of early-blooming rice plants that sat between them and the women on the footpath. Behind her, she sensed Rinki gloating.

*I know what you’re thinking, Lord Ran Rinki. You only tempt other people to action and never leave a piece of evidence behind.*

The only villager who had dealt with Lord Koh’s threats and negotiations in person, and thus knew Rinki’s face, was Unran. Now that *he* was out of the picture, there was no one left who knew about his involvement. No matter how much the magistrate insisted he had been manipulated by Ran Rinki, it would just sound like an excuse to everyone else.

That was the reason he had sprinkled red herrings here and there, dropping Kou and Gen tassels and using the Kin clan’s sash. When suspicion fell on him, everyone would think, “So the Ran clan are the next in line to be framed?”

*Too bad for you, though.*

Reirin waded through the rice plants, crouching down when she reached a certain spot.

“Oh, and it’s not just the contract we have. We have a witness too.”

She grabbed a surreptitiously placed straw mat and gently pulled it back.

“Come—can you sit up, Unran?”

Then she lifted Unran, who had been lying underneath it, in her arms.

“Hrk!”

Reirin locked eyes with Rinki, who lingered on the footpath. For the first time, there was a flash of panic in the eyes accentuated by his striking moles. She stared him down with the focus of a beast hunting its prey.

Ran Rinki never left evidence behind. But what if a witness had survived?

“Allow me to introduce you. This is Unran, who participated in the kidnapping as a representative of this village.”

“I...have it...” Clutching his stomach, Unran slowly sat upright. With trembling hands, he held out a letter stained in dirt and blood. Just yesterday, that motion alone would have been agonizing for him. Now he had a strong light of purpose in his eyes. “The contract’s...right here.”

He lifted his head and did it with a bang.

Though his face was still pale and his voice hoarse, Unran thrust the paper before the crowd. “The magistrate...ordered us...to punish Shu Keigetsu.”











Reirin squeezed his hand, which had very little strength in it, and took the contract from him. Rising to her feet, she unfolded it for the entire advance team to see.

“This is a decree from the magistrate, Koh Tokushou, to the son of the village chief, Unran. I hereby order the punishment of Shu Keigetsu, the villainess who incurred the wrath of the Heavens with her ineptitude and brought disaster upon the south. When the punishment has been served, I swear to reduce the taxes for the coming fall.’ Goodness, what a horrible thing to say about me.” Reirin read the letter loud and clear, then turned to Lord Koh with a smile that was deliciously villainous. “There you have it—you forced the villagers to abduct me and attempted to silence them once and for all.”

“It’s all lies!” the magistrate screamed, his back to the wall. He implored Gyomei for help, grinding his forehead into the ground before him. “Please don’t be tricked, Your Highness! It’s all baseless drivel. A complete fabrication! Tell me, how could a *Maiden* fall for the lies of these untouchables?!”

He pulled himself upright, only to crawl forward on his knees and hold out both hands toward the prince. “These people are filthy, lowly rabble. Ungrateful brutes! I’ve been kind enough to let them live, yet still they resent me and attempt to frame me for a crime I didn’t commit. The contract was forged. See that? There’s no official seal. It’s a fake. It’s all made up!”

Listening to him filled the villagers with a murderous rage. Superficial though it had been, the magistrate had always presented himself as a good-natured man, even to the untouchables. Now he was thrusting the ugly prejudice he’d kept hidden for so long right in their faces.

Taking advantage of their poor education, he’d neglected to put his seal on the document. In the event the villagers confronted him with the contract, he’d likely planned to weasel his way out of it on the grounds of their lowly status.

“Besides, no matter *how* much he despised her for her lack of talent, why would a mere township magistrate think to punish a Maiden?! Why would he resort to crime to see it done when a word to Your Highness would have sufficed?! I have no motive to see the Maiden of my own domain kidnapped!”

“I have a motive right here,” a deep voice rang out, cutting Lord Koh’s

desperate clamoring short.

The group whipped around with a start, only to find the captain of the Eagle Eyes, Shin-u, standing there. And not just him—the village men were lined up behind him, gasping for air. For some reason, their whole bodies were covered in dirt and they radiated fatigue, but there was a fire in their eyes as they propped each other up from behind.

Acting as their representative, Shin-u stepped out in front of Gyoumei and went down on his knees. “I have a report, Your Highness.”

“I’ve been waiting for this. Go ahead,” the prince said with a permissive nod.

Shin-u turned back to the men and called out to one of them. “Gouryuu.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Gouryuu stepped forward, his footing so unsteady that he all but buckled onto his knees. He was clutching a lacquered box that looked out of place against the backdrop of his dingy clothes.

With a slight nod, Shin-u bowed to Gyoumei. “If I may...there’s a part of the mountain that separates this village from the township. It is known as the ‘Cursed Forest.’ The villagers had previously refused to go near it for fear that venturing inside would bring them misfortune. However, when we learned that it was home to a variety of herbs effective in curing the recent ailment, I brought the men of the village with me into the forest, and there we found a large stash of gold hidden in a cave near a watering hole,” he said matter-of-factly, and then Gouryuu slid the lid off the box.

Inside, it was packed with gold fashioned into the shape of a bowl.

“There were sixty boxes filled with gold. There were also several skilled guards standing watch outside to protect the fortune,” Shin-u went on without so much as a glance over his shoulder. On cue, the men in the back shoved a few other men toward the front of the crowd. They were all gagged and looking haggard.

It seemed the dirt clinging to the Eagle Eyes captain had come from a fight.

That was when Lord Koh and his team finally realized what was going on: The

women had put on a ritual dance performance to buy time. Meanwhile, the village men had gone into the forest to look for the gold—evidence of the magistrate’s fraud.

“One more thing. The path leading from the cave went in the direction of the township. The guards also confessed to standing watch on Lord Koh’s orders. Thus, we have ample reason to believe that the magistrate of Unso, Koh Tokushou, is guilty of tax evasion.”

“It’s not true...” Confronted with this string of evidence proving his crimes, Lord Koh shook his head, huffing and wheezing. “No, no, no!”

Blood draining from his face, he glared at the watchmen and Rinki. He gritted his teeth with the realization that they were out to make him take the fall—but even then, he kept furiously brainstorming a way out of his predicament.

Was his best bet to point out that Rinki was the true mastermind and go down together? No, there was no point in aiming for mutual destruction. He had to prove his own innocence. Besides, he knew how calculating Rinki was; the man would be sure to dodge any accusations thrown his way. Pointing fingers at him would be a bad move.

In that case...

“It was the village chief...”

Backed into a corner, Lord Koh resorted to his usual tricks. Instead of striking back at a powerful enemy, he made a scapegoat out of the weak—those with no hope of defending themselves. This time, he went after Tairyuu, the deceased chief of the village.

“It wasn’t me. The chief stole all that gold!” he shouted, shooting a sideways glance at the villagers, who had gone completely stone-faced. “That man—Tairyuu—was a despicable fellow. He must have appropriated the aid I supplied to the village each year and stashed it in the forest. No wonder this village was always so poor, no matter how hard I tried to provide for it. It’s high time I convicted that man and delivered this gold to its rightful owners!”

Surely he had a fighting chance. He knew full well that the whole village despised the previous chief for setting foot in the Cursed Forest. Pinning the

blame on their pariah was all they had to do to get their hands on a mountain of gold; the foolish villagers were sure to jump on board without a second thought. After all, Lord Koh had made it this far by using the emotional and extrapunitive nature of the southern territory's inhabitants to his advantage.

"You villagers shunned him as well, did you not? Wise as you are, you must have picked up on that man's wicked nature. Only a fool would venture into the Cursed Forest... The reason he insisted on going there nonetheless was so that he could hide his hoard of gold!"

If he confronted them with their pariah's questionable actions, their repugnance would turn into fuel for their suspicions. From there, it would be a simple matter to foist the blame onto him. The untouchables' own intolerance would be what rescued Lord Koh from his current predicament.

"And that's precisely what earned him divine punishment."

"Screw that." An angry, gravelly voice interrupted Lord Koh's increasingly resonant speech. "My brother—*our chief*—wasn't a grubby man like you! You shut that dirty mouth of yours this second!"

It belonged to the chief's little brother and Unran's uncle, Gouryuu.

He rose to his feet, manners be damned, and slammed the lacquered box he was holding against the ground. "We won't be fooled by your flimsy lies! Our chief was the ruler of this village, the most principled man in the world! He'd never give a damn about gold!" His voice cracked with rage.

The men behind Gouryuu joined him in yelling.

"That's right! The chief wasn't after gold! He went into the forest to find us meat!"

"He risked his life for us! He was a good man! *You're* the one who twisted the facts, ain'tcha?!"

"The Cursed Forest and the disaster-wreaking villainess were all self-serving lies *you* came up with!"

Just like Gouryuu, each and every one of them cradled a box to his chest. They opened the lids at the same time and flung the contents into the air.

“You made a fool of us—and of the chief—to line your own pockets!”

The large chunks of gold slammed into the ground with a dull *thud*, reflecting the weak light of the sun.

As he watched this play out from the rice paddy, Unran chewed on his lip in silence.

“You did it, Unran,” said Reirin, gently stroking his back as she kneeled next to him for support.

“Yeah,” he responded with a quiet nod. His eyes the slightest bit damp, a small murmur escaped his lips: “*Dad.*”

Just now, the villagers had torn away the unfair stigma attached to Tairyuu with their own hands.

“Did I manage to pay you back a little?” Unran asked, speaking to no one in particular.

Though he didn’t specify who “you” was, Reirin answered emphatically nonetheless. “Of course.” As she watched Gouryuu and the villagers come together to blame Lord Koh, she added, “Both you and your father are upstanding rulers adored by your people.”

With a snuffle understated enough to not aggravate his wound, Unran broke into a smile.

“You damn coward!”

“Don’t give me that ‘wise as you are’ bullshit! You’ve been taking advantage of us all this time!”

In a fit of rage, the village men had begun picking up pieces of gold and chucking them at Lord Koh in place of stones. No, not just the men—even the women had risen to their feet to point fingers and berate the magistrate.

“We’ve lived in fear for so long because of that ‘Cursed Forest’ myth you made up to protect your precious gold! We’ve *starved!*”

“*You’re* the only curse here!”

As a stream of opulent projectiles rained down upon him, Lord Koh raised his



arms to shield himself, red-faced with humiliation. “You fools! Aren’t you listening to me?! If you’d just admit to your chief’s crimes, I’d give you all a more comfortable life!”

“We heard you! We’re saying we’re not interested, you bastard!”

The situation was spiraling out of control, with more and more shouts and gold coins being flung back and forth. It wasn’t until the bloodthirsty men broke into a run toward Lord Koh, ready to escalate things into a brawl, that someone finally intervened.

“Stop.”

The cool voice resounded in everyone’s ears, instantly rendering them silent. Gyoumei had taken control of the scene with a single word.

“That’s enough,” he said, holding out an arm to shoo the men back mid-throw.

Convinced that the prince had come to his defense, Lord Koh lit up with delight. “Thank you... Thank you so much, Your Highness!” He must have thought he had the upper hand. He leaned toward Gyoumei, expressing his complete and total agreement. “I’d expect no less from our wise, logical ruler-to-be. How despicable these untouchables are to raise a hand against an elder! Has no one ever taught them right from wrong? I’ll be sure to punish them—”

“I think you’ve misunderstood me. I meant that was enough treasure tossing.”

“Enough what...?”

Treasure tossing was a Harvest Festival rite in which gold and gems were strewn about in honor of the god of agriculture.

“All the conditions have been met.”

“Huh?”

Gyoumei cut past the bewildered magistrate, then came to a stop before the shrine where the Maiden had just been dancing. He gazed long and hard at the altar, as though he were communicating with something on the other side.

“The Maiden and her women have offered up a performance, cleansed

themselves with water in which an offering was submerged, and reunited with the men who were sent elsewhere. Treasure has been sprinkled over the earth in imitation of a bountiful harvest, and the leader of this land has been rinsed and prostrated himself over the ground. All the pieces are in place.”

The magistrate had been doused in water and pelted with gold. Only then did everyone present finally realize that they’d been following the Harvest Festival procedure to the letter, including the man who was crouching to shield himself.

“I’m sure the Maiden’s dance has appeased the god of agriculture. All that’s left is for me, the crown prince, to pray for a bountiful harvest.” Gyoumei picked up the bundle of early-blooming rice that had been offered at the shrine. He moved forward at an angle so as not to block the shrine from view, then lifted the ripe rice plants toward the skies. “O god of agriculture who rules from the Heavens above, I beseech of thee as a descendant of the dragon who once graced the earth.”

He neither danced nor knelt. Simply reciting his prayers in a loud, booming voice was all Gyoumei had to do to lend the area a sacred air.

“Grant the light of fertility to all those beneath the Heavens. Let the rice plants of the southern lands hang low, much like its people bow their heads before the throne of god.”

A strong wind abruptly swept in from the skies, which had been a dull sort of calm and overcast to that point. Feeling the presence of something extraordinary, both the villagers and military officers rushed to prostrate themselves on the spot.

“Restore the balance of yin and yang in accordance with the laws of heaven and earth. May the layers of yin qi that blanket the Heavens converge at once and transmute into yang.”

When the audience cast a fearful glance toward the Heavens through the gaps in their bangs, foreheads still pressed to the ground, they saw dark clouds gathering above Gyoumei’s head as if in response to his call. No sooner had light drops of rain begun to patter against their backs than it turned into a downpour akin to a bucket emptied over their heads. The people gasped.

Even the residents of a backwater township knew that Prince Gyoumei had

come into the world with an enormous dragon's qi, and that auspicious signs had popped up all over the capital the moment he was born. Still, none of them had expected the rumored dragon's qi to be quite so tremendous a power.

He could control even the weather at will. The crown prince, who possessed the same powers as the founder of Ei, was like a god in the flesh.

"Sin, impurity, and corruption. May all the sources of misfortune be rolled into the yin qi and turned into yang."

Thin bolts of lightning streaked down from the storm clouds. The dull rumble of thunder soon crescendoed into a loud roar, with the light and thunderclaps weaving through the gaps in the torrential downpour.

Drenched to the bone, the villagers shrieked in terror. "Eek!"

Gyoumei casually slid his gaze to the shrine behind him. The power that was about to be unleashed had to be a just and righteous one. He needed to get the timing exactly right.

Raising his voice louder than ever, he exclaimed, "Clear the gloom that hangs over these people!"

*Boom!*

A pillar of light pierced straight through the earth, followed by a tremendous roar that reverberated through the area. The villagers sprang upright with a cry at the earthshaking impact and then, upon realizing something had changed, ventured a timorous glance heavenward.

The rain had stopped.

"Huh?"

Just moments ago, a blanket of thick, dark clouds had been blotting out the skies. Now the whole expanse was an almost blinding blue, not a wisp of a cloud to be seen. The sun was shining strong and white. Real sunlight, for the first time in ages.

"It's sunny..."

"The skies are clear!"

Tears welling in their eyes, the villagers rose to their feet one after another. Heedless of their mud-splattered clothes, the puddles forming under their feet, or the fact that they were drenched from head to toe, even the adults' faces were alight with innocent joy as they looked to the Heavens.

“Aieeeee!”

In a stark contrast to their cries of delight, an ugly, shrill scream rang out from one corner. Everyone whirled to find that the voice belonged to the township magistrate, Lord Koh. For some reason, he was crouched on the ground, a torrent of blood spewing from his gut. Conversely, the man who had been unable to get up from his straw mat mere moments ago—Unran—was back on his feet, looking stunned.

“No way...” Unran groped at his stomach with trembling hands, then unwound the bandages. “I can’t believe this is happening...”

The gash that should have been there on his abdomen was gone.

“Guh... Gwah... Gaaaah!” Lord Koh moaned as he clutched at his gut, while Unran stroked his unscathed stomach.

The wound had swapped places between the two of them.

If this were any ordinary day, the phenomenon might have seemed unsettling. The crowd might have been repulsed, thinking it the work of a curse or a dark art. However, it had happened right after the Maiden performed an otherworldly dance, the prince shrouded in the dragon’s qi said a prayer, and lightning struck, so everyone naturally assumed it to be the work of the Heavens. The god of agriculture had punished the wicked.

Faced with this development straight out of a storybook, the villagers shook their heads, overcome. Then, louder than ever before, they yelled, “It’s a miracle!”

“Oh, praise be to the god of agriculture!”

“Long live His Highness!”

The people raised their hands to the skies, shouting for joy.

As Unran stood there, dumbstruck, a tinkling voice rang in his ears. “See? I

told you so, Unran. The Heavens rewarded your efforts.”

It was Reirin.

She slipped out of the muddy field, knelt right beside the writhing Lord Koh, and bowed low to Gyoumei. “On behalf of the township populace, I thank you for this successful Harvest Festival rite.”

“May the south prosper under the god of agriculture’s divine patronage,” Gyoumei responded with a magnanimous nod. He chuckled at Unran—who continued to stand stock-still in the middle of the field—then turned back to the frolicking villagers and announced in a dignified boom, “Hear this, village denizens. Lord Koh is a despicable man who evaded his taxes and caused the suffering of those he ought to have cherished. I hereby strip him of his title as magistrate, and I shall see a new leader appointed from the imperial capital. All the gratuitous taxes and unjust laws that fostered discrimination against the village shall be repealed. Henceforth, none shall be permitted to call you ‘untouchables.’ Don’t forget it.”

The gorgeous crown prince’s declaration drew a series of blinks from the disbelieving crowd.

“He’s repealing the heavy taxes?”

“The magistrate is going to be dismissed?”

One by one, they processed what he’d said—until, at last, Unran murmured, “We’re not untouchables anymore.”

Their shock turned into anticipation, which turned into joy. Excitement circling through their ranks, the people erupted into another round of cheers.

“Long live the prince!”

“We’re not untouchables!”

“Does this mean we’re free to come and go from the township?”

“Oh, look at that sun! The skies are clear!”

Men and women of all ages stood shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, and rejoiced. Gouryuu and Old Kyou rushed over to Unran, who stood rooted to the spot in the rice paddy, and dragged him over to the footpath. With no more

wounds to hinder him, he tread firmly over the soil. Seeing him stand so naturally at the center of the crowd brought a small smile to Reirin's face.

That instant, she felt someone's gaze boring into her—Ran Rinki. His previously pleasant eyes, accented by his signature moles, were narrowed in threat. The chill within could send a shiver down the spine in a different way than Shin-u's blue eyes, but Reirin's smile only grew wider. She was quite pleased to see she'd peeled away his mask of composure.

"Wait," someone called from the side, bringing Reirin to a stop just as she had taken a step toward Rinki. "I'll talk to him."

It was Gyoumei. The decision of what to do with Rinki obviously lay with the crown prince rather than his Maiden, so Reirin did as she was told and backed down. She deferred to Gyoumei and headed off somewhere else instead.

The person *she* had to talk to was hiding behind the shrine.

"Now then."

After he watched Reirin go, Gyoumei ordered the other ceremonial officers to take Lord Koh away. Facing Rinki once more, the prince leisurely raked a hand through his rain-soaked hair. "Color me surprised. This is the first time I've seen a serene man like you make a face other than a smile."

"Well, sure. With this many surprises, even *I'm* bound to be caught off guard. I mean, the prince—who was supposed to be back in the township—showed up out of nowhere to convict the magistrate, the skies suddenly cleared, and a wound moved from one person to another," Rinki replied, dripping wet. He managed to keep his tone light, but his eyes betrayed a glint of fear as he looked back at Gyoumei. "Your dragon's qi can also manipulate wounds, I take it?"

"Who can say?"

The prince's light shrug further underscored the boundless nature of his powers. Rinki's face turned grimmer than ever. Those with ties to the Ran clan possessed excellent powers of comprehension and never took long to process even the most complicated situations. As a trade-off, they expressed an intense

aversion to anything that exceeded the limits of their understanding.

*Oh, I'm loving this.*

It was with fascination that Gyoumei watched the first show of discomfiture from the calculating man who had never revealed his true colors.

Members of the Ran clan were altogether a clever sort. No matter how much evidence was lined up against them, they'd be sure to find a loophole and worm their way out of it. If Rinki had been accused of his crimes head-on, no doubt he would have immediately devised some way to escape punishment.

But there was no way to counteract divine retribution. His elaborate schemes, the dozens of options he'd prepared for every eventuality, his carefully crafted plans—Gyoumei felt an immoral sort of exhilaration in destroying all those with the logic-defying projectile that was the wrath of the gods.

*I suppose it could be considered underhanded—but I wouldn't have been able to give him my preferred punishment if I'd followed the proper procedures.*

A Ran's greatest weapon was their silver tongue. The more the law was involved in Rinki's judgment, the more room there would be for argument, and the more things would be steered in the direction the Ran clan wanted them to go. Gyoumei and Reirin hadn't wanted to let that happen.

As he watched Rinki struggle with how to approach this unexpected development, Gyoumei tugged his lips into a smirk. "You're looking a bit frightened. Do you have a reason to fear divine retribution?"

"No, sir." Ever the force to be reckoned with, Rinki returned his provocation with a faint smile. "Divine punishment has fallen upon Lord Koh—and *only* Lord Koh. In other words," he said, lifting his head and facing Gyoumei once more, "the Heavens won't punish me."

It was a bold claim to make. In this context, the "Heavens" referred not only to the gods of the pantheon but also to the "Son of Heaven" who ruled over the Kingdom of Ei—the emperor.

Rinki had to know just how vital the Ran clan was to the kingdom. How much value there was in their vast farmlands that filled the people's bellies, their sagacious intellect, and their ability to offer it all without a hint of self-



congratulation.

Considering how much consideration the current emperor gave to the balance of the five clans, he wouldn't punish a son of the Ran clan for messing around in some backwater township. If a Maiden was involved, usually her clan would be the ones to lodge a protest, but the Shu clan was more than happy to wash their hands of Shu Keigetsu. Besides, even if Unran testified to Rinki's involvement, no one would take the words of an untouchable seriously.

Having taken all that into consideration, Rinki was confident that he was well out of harm's way.

Gyoumei stared at the slender man before him for some time. Could the fact that Rinki no longer bothered to hide his arrogance be attributed to his mask of composure being stripped away? Still, the prince wasn't lenient enough to write his behavior off as laughable.

"Ran Rinki," he said, leaning forward just a fraction. "Just like Lord Koh, I think you've misunderstood something."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rinki asked, accompanied by a nervous twitch of his eyebrow.

"The Heavens didn't give you a pass. They simply took no notice of you," Gyoumei whispered like he was pouring venom into the other man's ear. At the same time, he flashed back to a conversation he'd witnessed in the warehouse the previous night.

"You see..."

The one speaking to Unran in soft tones was Reirin, who still occupied Shu Keigetsu's body. After meeting up with Gyoumei and Keigetsu and deciding to strike back at her foes, she had proposed a basic outline of her plan before sitting back down beside Unran, who was still resting on his mat.

She gently called out to him as he cycled between shallow sleep and wakefulness, giving him water from a piece of cotton. "The Heavens will never leave an effort unrewarded. Those who earnestly wish for salvation will find it. I'm a bit skeptical of curses and misfortune myself, but there's something I've

come to believe as of late: Miracles really do happen.”

“Sure...”

“I’m sure it’s a result of wishes resonating with each other. When someone makes a strong wish, it’s communicated to someone else, and it echoes on. Eventually, when it reaches someone with a soul as dazzling as a star or as powerful as the Heavens, that person will reach out a hand. I believe that string of coincidences is what we call a miracle.”

“Mm...”

Perhaps because he was still half-asleep, Unran’s responses were brief. Still, his voice sounded as relaxed as a child listening to a lullaby.

His steady replies drew a smile from Reirin. “I’m sure the stars and the Heavens will come through for you too.” She took the hand he’d thrown out over the side of the mat in both of hers. “But, you see, the lightning of divine retribution is so sharp that it might only strike a single villain. If the stars and the Heavens were to grant your wish—if they were to unleash justice upon the wicked—who would you rather see punished, Unran?”

This was an important question, as the strategy Reirin and her crew were developing would change drastically depending on his answer. They were going to transfer Unran’s wound to someone else. Her plan could bring down one foe without fail, irrespective of the law, but it would punish *only* that one person.

“There’s the township magistrate who exploited and desecrated the village for so long, and there’s the man who spurred him on from behind and stabbed you. Frankly, I’ve had it up to here with both of them.”

When Unran regained consciousness earlier, Reirin had given him a brief rundown of what she’d learned: that Lord Koh had been engaging in tax evasion for a long time; that he’d been using the village as a shield and was in the midst of trying to burn it to the ground to keep his secrets from getting out; and, lastly, that the Ran clan was involved.

In halting fragments, Unran had likewise recounted what had happened at the foot of the mountain, corroborating her version of events. His testimony that the supposed township envoy named Rin was actually Rinki, and that he

somehow got Lord Koh to kneel before him, had been more than enough to convince her of Ran Rinki's collusion.

As she thought, the Ran clan had taken advantage of the despicable magistrate and used him to their own ends. Lord Koh was irredeemable for using the village for his personal gain, but Ran Rinki was even worse for using all that to *his* advantage. The grave injury he'd inflicted upon Unran made Reirin most furious of all.

However, Unran's answer surprised her. "That's easy," he said without a trace of hesitation despite the dazed quality of his voice. "Obviously I'd pick Lord Koh."

"Really?"

"I mean...he made the village suffer. For decades. I couldn't tell you...how much discrimination we've faced...and how much we've starved for keeping out of the forest. My father...and going back further, my mother...both died because of him. It's not like Lord Koh's hand was forced. He got taken advantage of because he was already a bad guy."

Unran reached out his free hand to gently touch the wound on his abdomen.

"I'll have the chance to get back at the guy who stabbed me...someday. 'Cause I'm still alive and kicking. But...my neighbors who died on account of Lord Koh using 'em...will never get up again. So..."

It seemed his stamina reserves weren't yet up to the task of talking for so long. Unran's eyes slowly began to drift shut again.

"For their sakes...it'd be nice if the gods did punish him..."

The ends of his words melting into the air, Unran gently drifted back to sleep.

Reirin glanced from Gyoumei, who was hanging back by the wall, to Keigetsu, and they all exchanged nods.

"You know what that means, Rinki? The 'untouchables' you derided as mere pawns passed you over. They chose to leave you be, determining that a man who's all talk could never do them much harm."

“ ... ”

Unran's answer could be seen as indicative of a villager's narrow-minded worldview. One could argue that overlooking the true evil to punish the crook right in front of him wouldn't do anything to fix the root of the problem. Yet Gyoumei and Reirin had interpreted it like so: Rather than stab the man who'd stabbed him, he had chosen to get even with the man who had tormented his village. It was the choice of a ruler.

“The man you failed to kill—Unran—may be a mere villager, but he's far nobler than you'll ever be.”

However mild mannered Ran Rinki seemed, he had far more pride than the average person. Having discerned this true nature of his, Gyoumei made sure to pick the words he'd hate hearing the most.

“Not even the ‘lowly’ villagers will spare you a glance. How pathetic you are, Ran Rinki.”

For the briefest of moments, Rinki's gorgeous face twisted into something ugly, drops of water trickling from his sodden hair.

Gyoumei felt a pang of satisfaction. Lord Koh and the Rans' scheme had hampered his movements for the past few days. While the prince had been forced to teach himself restraint, his butterfly had pushed herself harder and harder, and his supposedly disinterested half brother had put the moves on her. Despite the displeasure swirling inside him, Reirin had been in too much despair at the time for him to deck Shin-u, and he'd denied himself the chance to express his frustrations to Reirin by putting on airs after the fact. That was no time to be putting up a front and he knew it, but considering he'd almost killed her once, he couldn't afford to lose any more of her favor. To put a finer point on it, he wanted to behave like a mature man in front of her so she would feel compelled to rely on him a little.

In which case, he had no choice but to take his anger out on the mastermind. And so what if he did? This wasn't a tantrum—it was a burst of righteous indignation.

“Oh, right. I felt bad that no one was paying attention to you, so before you had a chance to explain yourself, I sent a post-horse to the Ran patriarch with a

summary of what happened here. I'm sure your beloved father will take plenty of notice of you when you return home. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Wha..."

The prince knew about the Ran clan's succession dispute. Although Ran Rinki was the second son, he was the favorite to win over even the eldest—the son of the head's legal wife. Despite his confidence that he could tame even the imperial family, Rinki was concerned with only one person: his own father, the Ran patriarch.

"Congratulations on the huge blunder. Your quick wit could have been useful to me, but it doesn't seem like you'll be serving by my side anytime soon. Too bad."

Set a thief to catch a thief. If the Ran clan refused to bend to the authority of the emperor or the power of the law, he'd leave it to their own to deal with Rinki. The family was intelligent and never tipped their hands. They'd easily cut off any fool who had made such a disgraceful showing as to get caught in the act.

*That's one down.*

Gyoumei gazed coolly upon Rinki, who trembled with humiliation. The crown prince only had so much authority in this kingdom. Although he seemed to hold supreme status, in reality, he was kept carefully removed from strife and disaster. If he tried to act on his emotions, he would find himself bound by all manner of fetters—be it consideration for the five clans, precedent, or conventions.

Even so, he had no choice but to strengthen himself in what ways he could. When he found himself stuck, he'd call upon the few people he could trust, borrow their eyes, use them as his hands and feet, and slowly but surely chip away at the malignant tumors.

*I won't make the same mistake twice.*

He reached up to adjust his crown out of habit. As he'd left the bulky headpiece back in the township, his fingertips only grazed wet hair. Yet his "crown" was always there. Sometimes its weight was almost suffocating,

hampering him as he walked. Still, if he couldn't bear those burdens with a light touch, he'd never be able to protect the one he held so dear.

Just as Gyoumei was about to depart, leaving Rinki to clench his fists in silence, he stopped and turned back around. "One more thing," he said. "I dodged a question of yours earlier. Let me set the record straight: It wasn't my dragon's qi that transferred the wound to Lord Koh."

"So, what? It was the will of the agriculture god who watches over the south?" Rinki growled.

Gyoumei blinked, then broke into a small smile. "Well put."

Shu Keigetsu could be considered the protector of the southern lands, and Kou Reirin, whose body she currently inhabited, had ties to the clan of earth—or, rather, the god of agriculture. Since this had all happened as a result of incurring the two girls' wrath, there was more truth to Rinki's remark than he realized.

"It never pays to anger a god."

Amused, the prince flicked his gaze toward what lay beyond the shrine.

\*\*\*

"Huff... Huff..."

Behind the shrine, Keigetsu was panting. Her stunning good looks as "Kou Reirin" had been squandered by her village girl disguise. Worse yet, her face was contorted in exhaustion, her whole body heavy as lead after casting such a complicated spell.

"Well done," said Tousetsu from beside her, wearing a rare look of sympathy as she rubbed the Maiden's back.

"Lady Keigetsu!" came a stifled shout as another girl burst onto the scene. Needless to say, it was Reirin with Shu Keigetsu's face. "Are you all right, Lady Keigetsu? You did splendid work. Allow me to wipe your face dry. Oh no, your robe is soaked through... Shall I bring you a change of clothes and some water firs—?"

"Don't bother." Keigetsu curtly interrupted her friend's frantic efforts to

attend to her every need. “Just leave me be. You back off too, Tousetsu. I just cast an intricate spell, so I need to rest.”

Sure enough, Unran’s wound “swapping” to Lord Koh’s body at the precise moment Gyoumei unleashed a bolt of lightning with his dragon’s qi had been Keigetsu’s doing.

*“Lady Keigetsu, you once said you need to be in physical contact with the target of your spell or else it might not cover their full body. Could we use that to our advantage to transfer the wound on Unran’s stomach and only his wound to Lord Koh?”*

This was the vengeance Reirin had requested of Keigetsu following her offer to help. Of course, wielding her Daoist arts in front of a crowd would have frightened the villagers and put Keigetsu at risk. Neither could they have “Kou Reirin” branded a practitioner of the forbidden arts. Thus, the plan was to disguise it as “divine retribution,” perhaps enacted by Gyoumei’s dragon’s qi when the balance of yin and yang was restored through the Harvest Festival, or delivered at the behest of the agriculture god satisfied with the rite. That way, the villagers would bow before the god’s authority, and Gyoumei could exact revenge without accusations of abusing his power as the crown prince.

*“It means the punishment will be carried out without a trial or verdict, but what can we do? It’s the Heavens’ will.”*

Keigetsu had been flabbergasted by the sight of Reirin tilting her head to one side and nonchalantly suggesting they exploit both the gods and the crown prince. *“Hold on just a second. I never said I knew how to switch injuries with my magic!”*

*“Oh, but you did. You mentioned that if you use your spell from too far a distance, you might end up switching only a single part of the body, like birthmarks or wrists. You even said that you turned your own arm into a cat once,”* Reirin had shot back with a smile.

It had dawned on Keigetsu then that her friend was quoting their conversation over the flame call. She’d never dreamed that Reirin would find a use for the old failures she’d mentioned offhand.

*You never know what she’s going to twist to her advantage!*



Keigetsu had cursed her own carelessness. The same thing had happened back when they used a venomcraft on Shu Gabi. Why hadn't she learned her lesson the first time?

In the Kingdom of Ei, the Daoist arts were by and large considered a form of dark sorcery. She'd always hidden her talent to avoid persecution, so upon meeting someone who *didn't* discriminate, she'd blabbed too much for lack of a baseline of what was appropriate to divulge.

*"Fine, I did say that...but I told you that's what happens when the spell spirals out of control! It was a fluke. I can't just pinpoint the wound—especially not in a place like this, where the flow of qi is disrupted!"* Keigetsu insisted, but Kou Reirin had refused to back down.

*"That won't be a problem. We're going to balance the forces of yin and yang."*

Holding the Harvest Festival rite and offering a dance to the god of agriculture would restore the balance of yin and yang to the region. In addition, Reirin had suggested that Gyomei could make it rain, dampening the excess fire qi as a natural result and stabilizing the spell even further. For an amateur, Keigetsu had to admit she was spot on.

In short, the odds were in their favor. That said, the part of the plan where Keigetsu had to do that *on top* of using her flame magic to establish ongoing communication with Shin-u and Keishou had taken quite a toll on her.

"It's always magic this, magic that! You're wringing the life out of me!"

"True... That's a fair point."

"What am I, your jack-of-all-trades? Way to dump all the important work on me. Besides, swapping a wound from one person to another is no better than a curse! You've got to be crazy to come up with an idea like that!"

"Yes... Perhaps I *am* crazy." Reirin nodded along meekly, perhaps from a place of guilt. She waited for Keigetsu to catch her breath before bowing her head low. "Thank you very much for all your help with this. I'd also like to apologize for how much I've asked of you," she said sincerely.

Eventually, she straightened back up again. When she did, she was looking at Keigetsu with pride and joy. "Still, I was confident the spell would be a success.

You're the comet who makes my wishes come true, after all."

There was something embarrassing about her steadfast, admiring gaze. Keigetsu soon found herself lapsing into silence.

"I'd expect no less from the Maiden of the southern territory. You used your power to save your subjects in a way no one else could."

There wasn't a trace of falsehood in her earnest expression or voice. All they contained was pure, undiluted respect.

Struggling to accept the girl's unadulterated gratitude head-on, Keigetsu turned her head to the side. "Hmph. Even if I hadn't swapped the wound, the evidence of his fraud would have been enough to get Lord Koh convicted. You don't have to flatter me."

Beyond the shrine, she saw the villagers still looking to the skies and rejoicing. Women were moved to tears, children scampered around in excitement, and men sang at the top of their lungs. She'd barely even interacted with these inhabitants of her own domain. Yet, mysteriously enough, as she watched them express their joy with their whole bodies, Keigetsu felt something tight in her chest come undone.

Gyoumei was the one who had cleared the skies, but *she* was the one who had punished Lord Koh in plain view and set the villagers free.

*I saved the inhabitants of the southern territory—as their Maiden.*

Keigetsu stared at her reflection in a puddle. Even clad in old hand-me-downs, "Kou Reirin's" face was bursting with delicate beauty down to the tips of her eyelashes. Inside, however, was the talentless girl known as the court sewer rat.

She had lost her guardian, didn't know how to socialize, and couldn't measure up to the other Maidens in education or strength of will. Due to the swap, she'd even ended up leaving the entire Harvest Festival rite to Reirin. Still, for all her flaws, she'd managed to overcome her challenges. She'd kept her rival in check during the tea party, crossed a river to rush to a friend's side in her time of need, and punished a wicked man with her Daoist arts.

Those were all things only Keigetsu could have done.

*Would you look at that? I was the star of the show.*

Tiny bubbles floated up from the pits of her heart. They rose through the once heavy and murky depths and, upon breaching the surface, exploded into a faint burst of light. There came bubble after bubble. Each time one popped, she felt a little tingle in her chest, and her lips almost curled into a smile despite herself.

*Not bad,* Keigetsu thought.

A Shu Keigetsu whom Kou Reirin could rely on. A Shu Keigetsu who could deliver her subjects with magic not even the crown prince could handle.

It was the first time Keigetsu had ever felt this emotion, this dazzling light that shone from within. The feeling was plump, rich, warm, and smooth all at once. Ostensibly, she was the one who had saved the villagers, and she'd exhausted herself to do it. Strangely enough, she felt so fulfilled that it was almost like *she* was the one who had been saved. Dangerously close to breaking into an embarrassing smile, Keigetsu tightened the muscles of her face into a scowl.

"Um, Lady Keigetsu, I promise I wasn't just saying that. I truly am grateful to you." Reirin leaned forward anxiously, having apparently misinterpreted that reaction. Then, her eyes widening as though struck with an idea, she said hesitantly, "Oh... I'm sure my gratitude alone isn't enough to repay you for what you've done, though. It's not too late to make a grand appearance before the villagers, declaring, 'It is I, the envoy of Heaven who wields the Daoist arts!' and take the credit as the leading—"

"How would it make any sense for 'Kou Reirin' to swoop in out of nowhere?! Besides, I *said* I don't want anyone finding out I'm a practitioner!"

"Right... In that case, it may take some time, but perhaps we should have a statue of you erected in the village. Or, at the very least, we can name this day the 'Keigetsu Festival' and make it an official village holiday—"

"Tousetsu," said Keigetsu, turning toward the heretofore quiet court lady with a completely straight face. "Keep this berserker woman in line."

"I can't," she replied with a deadpan expression.

*Couldn't she have made a little more effort than that?*

“Hey, can I have a minute?” came a reserved voice from the other side of the shrine, at which all three girls spun around. There, they found Unran, who had been whooping for joy with his comrades only moments ago.

Reirin rose to her feet, worried something had happened. “What’s the matter?”

“Well...” Unran paused, his mouth twisting into a grimace. This was unusual behavior coming from him.

“Are you still hurt?”

“No. I’m totally healed.” Massaging the spot where his wound had once been, he mumbled, “Hard to believe things like this can happen.” It seemed he was still reeling after his would-be mortal wound had vanished into thin air, taking all the pain along with it.

“Then are Lord Koh or Lord Ran Rinki still digging their heels in?”

“Nah. The military officers dragged Lord Koh away, and Rin’s busy getting a talking-to from His Highness... It’s just, uh...” Unran trailed off until he finally found his resolve and cut to the chase. “I wanted to say a word of thanks on behalf of the village. Could I talk with you alone for a minute?”

“With me? But...” Reirin blinked. She appreciated the sentiment, but Gyomei’s dragon’s qi had parted the clouds hanging over the village, and Keigetsu was the one who had transferred the wound.

*I haven’t done anything deserving of thanks, I don’t think...*

In fact, she might have been better off encouraging him to thank Keigetsu instead.

Yet the moment Reirin went to face her, Keigetsu turned her head to avoid making eye contact and heaved a deep sigh. “Ugh, I’m exhausted. I’d rather go rest in a clean room than out here among a bunch of mud puddles.”

Evidently, she didn’t want the villagers to find out about her good deeds—or, more specifically, the truth about the magic spell she’d cast.

“Take me somewhere,” she demanded, hauling Tousetsu off by the arm as she fled the scene.

With Reirin left behind, Unran followed Keigetsu's example and dragged her along by the arm. "Come with me," he said as he began to walk.

Keeping the cheering crowds in the corner of their vision, they walked in silence for a while, leaving the rice paddies and huts behind. Eventually, they came to a small hill overlooking the village—a cemetery dotted with large stones here and there.

"Oh." When Reirin caught sight of what lay at its farthest end—Tairyuu's tombstone, which had been cobbled together from several smaller rocks—her eyes went round. "His grave..."

The leaves and grass that once blanketed the tombstone had been wiped clean, and there was even an offering of wild flowers set out before it.

"Uncle Gouryuu told me that the men came together to clean off the grave before heading into the Cursed Forest. He even said that, once things settle down, they're going to gather some bigger rocks together and build him a better tombstone. Talk about opportunistic, right?"

Unran chuckled as he crouched low. Despite his sarcastic tone, there was no hiding the delight on his face in profile. He took the contract he had just flaunted before Lord Koh from his breast, then carefully set it down atop the grave.

"Guess what? This contract saved the whole village," he said slowly, almost like the man himself was standing just beyond the tombstone. "We were saved because you taught us how to write, Dad."

Reirin knelt gently beside Unran, who had come to call Tairyuu "Dad" without hesitation. She wordlessly closed her eyes and folded her hands together so as not to disrupt his prayers. The etiquette felt closer to that of granting a dignitary an audience than visiting a grave, but that felt like the more appropriate way to greet the former ruler of the village anyway.

A soft breeze blew through, like a gentle acknowledgment. Around the time the light carried on the wind had stopped glittering off the remnants of raindrops left on the grass and leaves, Unran slowly turned back to Reirin. "When I was talking with everyone earlier, we decided that I'm going to officially take over as the new chief. Both the former chief and I, his successor,

would like to thank you on behalf of this village,” he announced in an earnest voice.

Reirin stared back at him for a few long moments. She had no right to accept his thanks. It was the prince’s power that had cleared the rain clouds hanging over the land, and it was Keigetsu’s magic that had spared Unran his injury. If anything, Reirin was just the villainess who had driven him to recklessness, decided all hope was lost, and even tried to take his life.

“Your thanks ought to go to His Highness and Lady—er, the god of agriculture. Be sure to commend yourselves for standing up and fighting in solidarity too,” she told him, reflecting on the lessons she’d taken from all this.

“Oh, give me a break.”

A sulky look imploring her to just take the thanks overtook Unran’s strong features, so Reirin was compelled to add, “If you still insist on thanking me regardless, please remember that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ gave her all for her people—that’s all I ask.”

“Of course.” Unran nodded without hesitation. “I’d never forget it.”

His red-tinged brown eyes shot straight through Reirin’s.









Leaning forward on his knees, he repeated himself with more fervor. “Shu—*Lady* Shu Keigetsu. We will never forget what you did to save our village.”

Unran had always referred to her simply as “you.” This was the first time he’d ever called her by her name.

“Not ever.”

The events of the past few days played back in his head at a dizzying pace. From the start, “Shu Keigetsu” had thrown the village into chaos with one unexpected action after another. When the captain of the Eagle Eyes had disparaged them as untouchables, she’d put herself out there to refute him. Not only had she forgiven Unran for nearly assaulting her in the mountains, but she’d even helped him let go of his issues with his father.

She hadn’t hesitated to extend a helping hand when the villagers were suffering and hurling their waste everywhere. She’d admonished those looking for an outlet for their fear and anger, and she’d lectured Unran on what a chief ought to be. Finally, she’d saved Unran’s life when he was gravely injured, taken revenge for him, and dispersed all the gloom hanging over the village—the dense clouds, the despicable magistrate, and the unjust discrimination.

Under most circumstances, Unran would have thrown in a cynical laugh and teased her as he delivered his thanks. Yet, just this once, the emotion welling up inside him had overtaken his words, and all he could do was repeat the same thing over and over again like a child.

“Not ever.”

She was a Maiden, and he was her subject. If it weren’t for this trip, they never would have met, and said trip was a once-a-year event that never repeated a destination. This was sure to be the last time the two of them ever spoke.

Thus, Unran’s tongue could only spill a promise to never forget. “Thanks for everything” was a parting line. The moment he said it, the case would be closed and their relationship would come to an end. Somewhere deep down inside, he was longing for a connection to her.

He wouldn’t forget her, even if they were apart. Even if their lives never

crossed paths again, Unran—and the rest of the village—would carry their gratitude for “Shu Keigetsu” in their hearts forevermore.

“I know.”

Had his earnest wish gotten through to her? The Maiden before him offered no thank-you, instead nodding quietly back at him.

Unran briefly pursed his lips into a thin line, then hesitantly fished something from the breast of his garment. “It might not do you any good to have this, but...”

It was a broken piece of rock—a stone that had been discolored black and splintered into a thin fragment resembling a blade. This was the natural shield that Unran’s father had once burned, the same one that had saved both “Shu Keigetsu” and Unran’s lives.

“Will you hold on to this for me? Consider it a token of our gratitude. A token of the loyalty we villagers have sworn to our Maiden.” No sooner had he held it out to her than he began to feel self-conscious of what a shoddy gift it was, so he rushed to add, “Isn’t that a thing? You know, vassals will swear their fealty by offering a family heirloom or whatever. Our village doesn’t have any treasures, though, so I thought I’d give you the most useful thing we’ve got, or at least something I figure you’d appreciate.”

He pushed the rock into Reirin’s hands as her eyes went wide. “Since it saved both of our lives, it’s an effective talisman, if nothing else. It can be used as a substitute for flint, and as you already know, it can also be a pocket-sized bla—”

“Unran.” She gently shoved it back at him. “I can’t accept this.”

Her voice was gentle, but it was a firm rejection. Unran fell silent.

“Should’ve figured,” he muttered glumly after a long pause. “What kind of Maiden gets handed a rock and is thrilled it can make for either flint or a blade?”

The Maiden scrambled to correct him as he gave a self-deprecating shrug of his shoulders. “That’s not the issue. I’m touched, and I’d like very badly to keep it.”

“You *what?*” Unran blurted, a dubious look on his face.

“But, well,” she went on, pointing behind Unran, “if you’re looking for a little something to keep us connected, there’s a better option than allowing me to have a precious memento of your father.”

Her slender finger pointed in the direction of two approaching figures.

“Oh, there you are, Rei—I mean, Lady Shu Keigetsu.”

“It’s about time we headed back to the township. We’re getting ready to leave.”

It was the two ceremonial officers of the Kou clan, Kou Keikou and Kou Keishou. Each man had a dove perched on his shoulder and raised a lazy hand in greeting as he approached. The girl rose to her feet to greet them.

“You came at just the right time.” A smile blooming on her face, she bowed with all the grace of a model Maiden. “Ceremonial officers of the Kou, Lord Keikou and Lord Keishou. Allow me to thank you for lending me your support until the bitter end, particularly given the string of disturbances over the past few days.”

The Kou brothers exchanged confused glances when their sister offered them a ceremonious greeting as “Shu Keigetsu.” As soon as they noticed the Maiden eyeing Keikou’s shoulder, however, a look of understanding passed over their faces, and they each knelt in a manner befitting a military officer.

“You’re too kind.”

“If anything, we ought to apologize for our failure to prevent your abduction.”

“My, no need to be humble.”

The trio moved the conversation along in perfect sync, slowly but surely getting to the main topic.

“No, I assure you I’m being most serious. I’ve been grappling with how I, as a ceremonial officer, ought to apologize for exposing a noblewoman to such danger.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

“If you’d only allow it, we’d offer up everything to our names in search of your forgiveness.”

“Goodness gracious.” The Maiden who had brought two military officers to their knees—Reirin—put a hand to her cheek and heaved a sigh. “If you truly insist, perhaps I should request something simply to put your minds at ease.”

She bid her two brothers to stand, and then, in a show of accommodating their wishes, looked up at Keikou with her best puppy-dog eyes. “May I have that dove you’ve raised with such loving care?”

“Of course.” Keikou nodded graciously, then transferred the dove from his shoulder to his palm in a sweeping gesture. “From this moment forward, this messenger dove belongs to you. Feel free to boil it, roast it, or hand it off as you please.”

Reirin cradled the dove in both of her hands, only to pass it off a moment later. “In that case, I’m giving it to Unran.”

“Very well.”

“Huh?”

The surprised voice was Unran’s. Though he caught the bird on instinct when it began flapping its wings, confusion was evident in his reddish-brown eyes.

“Unran. This is a dove Bro—Lord Kou Keikou—has given special training. With enough practice, it could even learn to travel the distance between this village and the imperial capital. If you tie a message to its leg, we can communicate back and forth.”

“Ah!”

Reirin watched cheerfully as his eyes went wide. “I’d rather *you* take good care of your father’s rock. Keep the former chief’s feelings close to your heart as you guide this village—and be sure to learn lots of new characters. I’ll correct your spelling for you.”

*This* was the “little something” she’d come up with in place of his keepsake.

Beside Reirin, Keikou said, “Hmm. I *have* seen plenty of potential in you, Unran. I look forward to keeping up with your training through this dove.” He

seemed more than happy to entrust the man with his beloved pet.

For a while, Unran reflected upon Reirin's words in silence. Eventually, he stroked the bird's sleek feathers and gave a slow nod. "Got it." He broke into a grin and, perhaps to distract from his palpable glee, asked, "How the heck am I supposed to train a dove, though?"

Those eyes that had so often held a sharp edge to their gaze were now sparkling with delight.

Having found an even closer "connection" than the rock fragment, he looked dazzled for a moment before remembering himself and standing up straight. "Say. Thanks for—"

This time around, he tried to be true to his feelings and express his thanks, but he didn't get to finish his sentence.

"Don't." Reirin had pressed a finger to his lips to silence him.

"Why? Are you still being modest?" Unran asked her, batting her finger away in a huff.

"Well, that's part of it. But beyond that," said Reirin, putting a hand to her cheek, "there's still something I have left to do."

"Scuse me?"

"Hmm. It may not be relevant as far as *your* feelings are concerned, but still..." While Unran gaped at her, Reirin heaved a quiet sigh. Thoughts raced behind her slightly downcast eyes. "The magistrate was pulling the strings of the impoverished villagers. There was someone pulling his strings too. Finally, I believe Lord Ran Rinki had an accomplice of his own in the shadows. Someone who darted around getting things done with words alone."

Even Ran Rinki, who had relaxed his guard under the assumption he was in a safe position, was doomed to be cut off from his clan like a lizard's tail. The pragmatic Rans would never let him return to the public stage again. In that case, who had maintained a truly safe position until the bitter end?

Images of a certain someone flitted across Reirin's mind.

*"If you don't have an erhu, why not put on a different performance instead?"*

It was she who had always spoken softly and put on a good-girl act. The Ran Maiden as lovable as a small animal: Ran Houshun.

During the pre-celebration, when Keigetsu was upset over losing her erhu, she'd been quick to suggest that Keigetsu offer up a different art. Kasui was the one who had ultimately recommended a dance, but she had clearly been influenced by Houshun's advice. For a long time now, the Ran Maiden had used her own words as a springboard to manipulate the words and actions of the people around her.

*"Don't you have that gorgeous ceremonial garment the Kin clan provided us?"*

She had guided Keigetsu back to her room and impelled her to touch the robe.

*"Its shiny metal embroidery alone ought to be worth ten thousand pieces of gold."*

She had raised her voice to draw the attention of the crowd—particularly Old Kyou, who had infiltrated the village—and emphasized the value of the garment.

Most likely, even the broken erhu had been part of her plot. Ran Houshun had almost certainly been in on this scheme from the beginning. She'd dirtied Keigetsu's robe, pushed her into a corner, and had her kidnapped. In anticipation of silencing the population, she'd had Old Kyou bring the sick robe back to the village. Then, after all the suffering she'd put its people through with the dysentery outbreak, she'd attempted to burn their home to the ground by spreading ugly rumors about Keigetsu.

*I have to wonder which of them was the first to draw up the plan.*

There were the villagers who had engaged in a kidnapping, and there was the magistrate who had incited them to action. Behind the magistrate was Rinki, who had been pulling his strings, and Houshun, who had profited from his evil.

How far could the law go in bringing them to justice? Due to political entanglements, it likely wouldn't be possible to punish her through official channels. And yet...

*"I have to punish all the scoundrels who caused my dear friends so much*

anguish.”

“Urk!” Unran’s face froze in horror when Reirin looked up with a giggle.

Their consternation evident, her two brothers called out to her in quick succession.

“Uh, c’mon now. The skies are clear, the disease is gone, and the village got its happy ending. She *is* a girl, and it’s questionable whether anything she did counts as a crime, so maybe keep things civil...?”

“Look, we already have a lot of cleanup to do here, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t cause another scene.”

Perhaps cowed by the fighting spirit in her smile, the Kou brothers were being unusually weak-kneed.

Reirin gracefully brushed off their concerns. “Fret not. The rest can wait until we’ve returned to the capital.”

She took a deep breath and looked out over the sprawling village. There was a warm breeze. The fragrance of rich earth and verdure. Clear skies. All she wanted to grace the rejoicing villagers’ home was a golden harvest. She would take the last remaining roots of discord back to the capital and deal with them there.

“Come,” Reirin said, clenching her fists with a smile. “We’re in the final stretch. Let’s do this with a bang.”



## Epilogue

“I’M SO DONE...”

It was an afternoon in the Maiden Court. Though an invigorating autumn breeze had kicked up the past few days, the voice that rang out from the garden pavilion sounded anything but. It belonged to the Maiden of the Shu clan—Shu Keigetsu—who hung her head as she sat before a chessboard.

Her shoulders shook for a few moments until she whipped her head back up and jabbed a finger at the Maiden of the Kou clan—Kou Reirin—who sat across from her. “Didn’t we agree this was a tutorial match? You’re *tutoring* me! Is crushing your opponent’s spirit beyond repair your idea of teaching?!”

“Why, of course not. Are you suggesting you’re weak enough to let a mere ten consecutive losses get you down? I’d never think so little of you.”

“That would get *anyone* down! Think a little less of me, please!” Keigetsu shouted, her face twitching.

“Wow...” Leelee muttered as she peeked over from the side.

“You took her out in the opening moves this time. Even an amateur like me can tell what a crushing defeat that was.”

“Well, Lady Keigetsu asked me to stop making her believe she can win, only to wipe the floor with her in the endgame, so I took the feedback to heart.”

Leelee smiled dryly. “Only *you* would respond to criticism like that by cornering her even harder.”

Tousetsu nodded proudly as she poured another round of tea. “Yes. I’d expect no less from Lady Reirin.”

“Uh, I didn’t mean that as a compliment,” said the redhead, pulling a face.

Reirin turned back to her opponent with a rueful smile. “Forgive me, Lady Keigetsu. It seems I’m in an aggressive mood today. If that’s taking the fun out of the game, perhaps we should call it a day.”

Keigetsu snorted. “Today’s hardly the first time you’ve been aggressive. It’s

fine—let's keep going. Come on, line the pieces back up.”

“Or you could just leave...”

“I won't. Not until I'm certain you won't go hunting Ran Houshun.” Keigetsu dismissed her mumbled protests in an authoritative tone, then plopped back down in her chair. With her eyes narrowed into a glare, she cast a sweeping glance around the autumn gardens and then looked back at Reirin. “I heard all about it. Not satisfied to stop at punishing Lord Koh and Ran Rinki, you declared your intent to strike back at Ran Houshun right in front of your two doting brothers. Now Lord Keishou is so concerned you'll do something reckless that I somehow got roped into keeping an eye on you.”

“Goodness, Lady Keigetsu, whenever did you and Brother Junior get so close?” Reirin idly remarked.

“We're not close! Can't you see he's just using me?!” Keigetsu denied the suggestion with all her might, then glowered harder than ever. “I know Ran Houshun takes a walk through the courtyard every afternoon. I bet your plan is to pretend to take a break in the gardens so you can ‘coincidentally’ ambush her. The second our recess is over, it's back to the usual nonsense. Your initiative and vindictiveness are downright staggering,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Reirin gave a tiny shrug, not outright denying her accusation. “I'm not planning to ‘hunt’ her. I only want to have a little chat. To be met with such distrust from everyone I know, my own brothers included, is such a pai—sad thing.”

“Hold it. You were about to say it's ‘such a pain,’ weren't you?” Keigetsu pointed out, exasperated. Reirin responded with nothing but a lovely smile.

It had been a week since they'd returned from their trip. For that period, the crown prince had ordered that “Shu Keigetsu,” who had been kidnapped, and “Kou Reirin,” whose brother had been caught up in the incident, be afforded a week of rest on account of the emotional toll the events had taken on them. It was quite the thoughtful gesture.

Of course, his *real* goal was twofold. One was to keep Keigetsu, who was exhausted after returning to the capital and undoing the switch, out of sight.

The second was to prevent Reirin, who had reclaimed her rightful authority with the swap reversed, from immediately launching an assault on the Ran clan. In practice, the week-long “recess” was a cooldown period—or, to put a finer point on it, a confinement period.

“My brothers and His Highness are just the worst. How could they treat one as gentle as myself like some sort of raging boar? Even the captain comes by each and every day to supervise me on His Highness’s orders, telling me, ‘Don’t even think about trying anything reckless.’ Oh, honestly, when have I ever been the reckless type?” Though the smile stayed on her face, irritation seeped into Reirin’s voice.

“How can you think you *aren’t*?” Keigetsu retorted.

If someone she cared about got hurt—even if that “someone” was a mere villager—this girl would go so far as to dabble in the forbidden arts in her quest for revenge. Worse yet, she was the type to willingly get herself kidnapped to avoid someone, wade into the mud of a desolate village to work their fields day after day, venture into the mountains, hunt wild animals, spend an entire night nursing the sick, and contemplate murder just to spare someone their suffering. Forget “the reckless type,” she was recklessness personified. As far as Keigetsu was concerned, Gyoumei and others were kind not to bind her hands and feet and lock her up in the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

“Listen. While we were resting, His Majesty the Emperor heard the facts of the case and delivered his judgment. The villains were punished. The case is closed,” Keigetsu said.

Thanks to the advance notice Gyoumei had sent to the imperial capital via post-horse, the matter had been investigated as soon as the party returned from their excursion, and a swift verdict had been reached. First, for his crimes of committing tax evasion and instigating the incident, Lord Koh was stripped of his title as magistrate, fined his entire worth, and exiled. Given the serious injury he had sustained, the verdict was as good as a death sentence.

Meanwhile, the villagers involved in the kidnapping had been acquitted on account of being coerced by Lord Koh, voluntarily backing out and exposing his plot, and especially “Shu Keigetsu’s” decision not to press charges. In keeping

with Prince Gyomei's promise, all the discriminatory ordinances against the village had been abolished as well. The village seemed extremely grateful for the verdict.

As for Ran Rinki, who had been caught engaging in shady behavior...although he hadn't been subjected to a formal punishment, such as exile or flogging, neither did he get off scot-free. Despite denying Rinki's involvement in the incident, the Ran patriarch had still taken the matter quite seriously, dismissing his son from his post on the basis that arousing any suspicion at all made him unfit to be part of the high-minded Ran clan.

Since resigning from his position as a military adjutant, which was supposed to be a sure path to success, Rinki had been lying low in a retreat in the eastern territory. There was no set limit on how long he was supposed to be there, so chances were good that he would never return to the political stage. In fact, rumor had it that not a single Ran had come to see him off the day he departed the imperial capital.

Once the patriarch's favorite, Rinki had gone over the head of his half brother, the eldest son, to set up his own estate in the imperial capital. When members of the Ran clan had later visited said estate to sort out his personal belongings, they'd found Rinki's once neat and tidy home ransacked by his own hands. Nonetheless, the Rans had swiftly cleaned up the mess. Sometime later, the eldest son moved in like nothing had ever happened.

The rumors had only lasted for that one fleeting moment. Since then, no one had heard so much as a whisper of the name "Ran Rinki." That said it all about what sort of family the Ran clan was.

"Not even Ran Rinki can manage much from a backwater so far removed from the capital," Keigetsu vehemently insisted. "Ran Houshun might have gotten off the hook, but there's nothing more she can do now that she's lost her partner. The wicked Ran siblings have been totally defanged."

Reirin smiled, gazing at the incense burner beside the table. "Well, we can certainly hope so."

The cryptic response drew a frown from Keigetsu. "You really are stubborn once you've set your mind to something. I'm telling you to let it go as one of her

victims, so that should be that. Anyway, just keep your head down and don't even think about taking matters into your own hands. Surprise attacks, suicide moves, ambushes, and incineration are all off-limits. Got it?"

"Goodness, Lady Keigetsu... You don't have to treat me like some animal that can't be reasoned with," Reirin protested.

"That's basically what you are!" Keigetsu shot back.

Beside her, Leelee nodded in solemn agreement. "You really can be relentless when you go on the offensive, Lady Reirin."

"Exactly. And you know what happens when you do something reckless and stupid? For some reason, I always find trouble at *my* doorstep!" Keigetsu leaned over the table, heedless of how she scattered the pieces on the board. "Just like water flows from high to low places, any disaster that falls upon you somehow makes its way down to me too. It's happened twice: first with the Double Sevens Festival and then with this whole incident. I swear it's some kind of curse. So you better not do anything crazy, you hear me?!"

She was neither joking nor sarcastic. Whenever Kou Reirin did something reckless, Keigetsu somehow ended up paying the price, whether that meant getting harangued by Reirin's anxious caretakers or being forced to take her place for something.

"Besides, wood parts earth. Given her affinity for wood, Ran Houshun is the worst possible matchup for an earth type. Yep, that sounds about right. A musclehead like you is no match for a blackhearted girl like her who puts up a facade of powerlessness. Your best option is to run—"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Lady Keigetsu, but it's a little too late for that." Reirin punctuated her placid interjection by pointing her finger.

When Keigetsu followed the gesture, the corner of her mouth twitched.

"Good day to you, Miss Reirin, Lady Keigetsu."

The one greeting them from a short distance away was none other than Ran Houshun.

"Good day, Lady Houshun," Reirin responded with a smile.

Houshun beamed in delight, then closed the distance between them with shy steps. Her robe was a pale blue-green, perfect for the Maiden of the clan associated with spring. She looked as adorable as could be, her flower-shaped ornamental hairpin swaying and jingling with each tiny step she took.

She politely came to a stop just short of the pavilion, making a show of hesitance to intrude upon the other Maidens' conversation. "Um, I'm sorry. Were you in the middle of a match? I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No. We just finished a round and were about to take a break. Would you care to join us in relaxing under the pavilion?" Reirin offered, smiling and extending a hand.

A blush rose to Houshun's face. "Oh! May I?"

Then, without missing a beat, Reirin suggested, "Oh, this would be even better if we had some tea. Tousetsu, could you go brew us a pot? I'm sorry to ask this, Leelee, but I'd like you to fetch us some snacks from the kitchen too. Do you mind, Lady Keigetsu?"

Tousetsu, Leelee, and Keigetsu exchanged quick glances. She was thinning out the crowd.

"I do. You can't just—"

Reirin was angling for her showdown with Ran Houshun. Sensing as much, Keigetsu's immediate instinct was to refuse her request, but Houshun clapped her hands together before she could finish her sentence. "That sounds wonderful! Ah, I know—I'm keeping some snacks I received from the Virtuous Consort back in my room. Could you go get them for me, Meimei? I can't let Miss Reirin treat me without returning the favor."

She, too, was aiming to send her high-ranking court lady clad in indigo blue elsewhere. She'd taken the bait. Upon coming to that realization, Keigetsu and the court ladies gulped.

"Go on, Tousetsu, Leelee. You heard me," Reirin said.

Leelee furrowed her brow in reluctance, but when Tousetsu nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am," she ultimately followed her lead. She glanced back over her shoulder multiple times, shooting Keigetsu a look that said, *Please don't let her*

*do anything crazy!*

*How am I supposed to do that?!* Left to fend for herself, Keigetsu was ready to tear her hair out. Meanwhile, the Kou Maiden and Ran Maiden were engaged in amicable conversation beside her.

“Both of your recesses are up today, I see. Um, quite a lot happened on that trip, didn’t it? I’d like to extend my heartfelt congratulations on your safe return and recovery.”

“Thank you. I hope I didn’t give you too much cause for concern, Lady Houshun.”

“No, not at all...or so I’d like to claim. To be honest, my heart nearly stopped when I heard you’d outstripped the advance team and rushed over to the village. You can be quite the daredevil sometimes, Miss Reirin.”

“Hee hee. We Kous aren’t the type to sit back when a loved one is in danger. I apologize for giving you a scare.”

One girl pouted with concern, while the other wore a wry but serene smile. At a glance, it looked like a charming, heartwarming scene. But Keigetsu knew their true natures and the fierce rage they were both sure to be harboring inside, so she was getting the chills just watching them.

*Basically, Houshun means, “A Maiden would have to be nuts to march straight into the Untouchable Village,” and Reirin means, “Then don’t put my loved ones in danger, you creep,” right...?*

Keigetsu picked apart the conversation between Reirin and Houshun, putting her newly honed translation skills to good use. She really had to wonder how these girls could smile so much in the face of their own personal nemesis.

“I was beside myself worrying about what would become of my best friend and brother in the event the village went up in flames. When His Highness saw how distressed I was, he decided to bring me along with him in secret. He’s such a dependable, warmhearted man.”

That one translated to: *It was the prince’s decision to go to the village. Still got a problem?*



“Yes, he is. He even ordered you to spend a week resting once we’d made it home... His Highness cares so deeply for you, Miss Reirin.”

Houshun’s comment probably meant: *Uh-huh, sure it was. He placed you under house arrest right afterward.*

Reirin put a hand to her cheek in a fluster, her troubled smile growing ever wider. “Indeed. He even came to visit me at the Kou Palace almost every day for the duration. I’m ashamed to have caused him such concern.”

Her brag about the prince’s affections dispelled the notion of “house arrest” in an instant.

“How wonderful,” Houshun murmured with a smile. Keigetsu had never heard so banal yet so spine-chilling a comment.

*Someone get me out of here...*

Keigetsu discreetly clutched her chest. Her heart was about to give out just listening to this conversation. Kou Reirin had told her Houshun “might have gotten the better of her,” but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. She was holding her own just fine. In fact, whereas Houshun came off as consciously masking her hostility, it was scary how it felt like Reirin was just being her usual self. Just how much of the hidden bite to her remarks was intentional?

Evidently satisfied to end the warm-up match there, Reirin beckoned Houshun under the garden pavilion and had her take a seat. She shuffled the chessboard to one side of the table and set the intricately designed incense burner in front of Houshun in its place. Perhaps the idea was to let her enjoy the aroma of the incense until the tea was ready.

A high-end fragrance of agarwood wafted from the burner.

“That’s such a pleasant aroma... It really puts me at ease. It’s like a comforting reminder that we’ve made it back home after a tumultuous adventure.”

Houshun broke into a happy smile. Her reaction was reminiscent of a small animal beginning to relax, a sight adorable enough to set off the protective instincts.

Irritated that she was keeping up her act when she had to know she was busted, Keigetsu snidely remarked, “True. I suppose all three of us had a rough time. I was kidnapped, Lady Kou Reirin’s brother was dragged into the mess, and *your* brother got the boot.”

*You’re treating it like someone else’s problem, but you Rans are the one who caused the whole mess.* That was what Keigetsu was trying to get at.

“Um...” Houshun’s face only fell sadly, not a crack in her demure demeanor. “I haven’t had the chance to see either of you for a while, but I wanted to give you both a proper explanation for what happened...”

She balled her tiny hands into fists and leaned across the table. “It’s true that my brother...that Ran Rinki established contact with Lord Koh. However, that wasn’t to incite the kidnapping, like Lord Koh suggested. He had his suspicions about the magistrate’s tax evasion, so he advised him to consider his options moving forward, out of courtesy for a neighbor.” Tears welling in her large eyes, she chewed on her lip sadly. “Yet Lord Koh felt cornered as a result. For fear that his actions would come to light, he resorted to such heinous acts as kidnapping and attempted murder. Which means, of course, that my brother holds some portion of responsibility for the disturbance. Thus, although he bore no legal responsibility, the Ran clan sentenced him to house arrest in a distant frontier as a matter of principle.”

*I see, so that’s the story they’re running with,* thought Keigetsu, unimpressed.

The clan had denied his actual crimes, framing it so they’d “chosen” to hand him a harsher punishment than necessary. Under those circumstances, a handful of Ran Rinki sympathizers were bound to pop up. Banking on that, the Rans planned to spread their beautiful little tale to as many people as possible. The game was to convince the world at large that their version of events was the truth.

“My brother has always been a kind, intelligent, and polite man. Now that he’s been chased off to a remote, unfamiliar land, I’m sure he’s going to face a lot of hardship. Though I realize it’s to take responsibility for what he’s done, my heart aches to think of him spending his days in solitude. I can only hope society won’t cast further stones at him...”

*Who are you to complain about casting stones?* thought Keigetsu. Here they'd been lenient enough to let Ran Rinki off with house arrest after all the trouble he'd stirred in the south, and she had the nerve to ask them for pity.

*She's not someone I'd want to make an enemy of or go after more than I have to, but it's hard to keep a cool head when she's being so incredibly brazen.*

Keigetsu was almost coming around to Reirin's idea of getting even... No, if she fell into step with her friend now, she was sure to end up dragged into some terrifying scenario. She would neither pity nor provoke the Ran clan. That was the most peaceful solution. Keigetsu did all she could to convince herself of that, painfully aware of her own emotional nature.

"My... That must be hard on you too, Lady Houshun."

Imagine her surprise when Reirin extended a hand to Houshun.

"I have brothers of my own, so I understand how you must feel. I'm sure it's eating you up inside."

"Oh, Miss Reirin..." Houshun nodded her head, eyes swimming with crocodile tears. "It is. I can't stop worrying about him! Still, I know it's his own fault for causing so much trouble. I hesitated to say anything to you and Lady Keigetsu in particular, since you two are the victims here..."

"It's all right. Feel free to tell me your honest feelings," said Reirin, her beautiful smile evoking images of a celestial maiden.

Keigetsu was baffled. *What is she doing?*

Was there a chance she'd been genuinely taken in by Houshun's devious squirrel act? On one hand, that didn't seem possible, but on the other, she knew the women of the Kou clan had a fondness for small creatures of her ilk. Kou Reirin in particular had an inexplicable love of caterpillars and other such bizarre critters, so there was a possibility that an adorable but grotesque creature like Houshun had pushed one of her weird buttons.

"Oh, I have an idea, Lady Houshun. If all the stress is taking a toll on you, why not stretch your wings a little and travel somewhere on our next long vacation? I'm sure we'd be allowed trips home to our own domains."

“Travel somewhere? Um...to the Kou clan’s central territory, you mean?”

“Yes. We own a villa in this lovely little retreat. I haven’t told the other Maidens about it yet, but I’d love to bring you there as a special guest.”

“Wow...”

Houshun lifted her head, touched, and Reirin gently wrapped both of the girl’s hands in her own.

*Are you kidding me?*

Keigetsu frowned as she watched this from the side. This was the first she’d heard of a villa, and she’d never been invited to any retreat. She knew Reirin wasn’t obligated to report to her first about these things, but they *had* been hanging out together for a while now. If she were going to invite a friend as a token of her gratitude, shouldn’t Shu Keigetsu have been first in line?

She was a bit miffed, but that feeling vanished along with Reirin’s next words.

“It’s a truly lovely spot—this little retreat called Ryuu-un.”

“...”

Strictly speaking, it was not the words themselves that did it but the look on Houshun’s face as soon as she’d spoken them.

In a rare sight, the Ran Maiden’s smile stiffened. “What did you just say?”

“Ryuu-un. It’s located, let’s see...somewhere in the eastern part of Ei, I believe?”

“I believe you’re aware, but the eastern lands of Ei are under Ran jurisdiction,” said Houshun, taken aback.

“Oh no.” Reirin put a hand to her cheek, releasing her grip on Houshun. “I assumed you’d already heard, Lady Houshun. Just recently, the retreat called Ryuu-un was annexed from the Ran clan’s eastern territory to the Kou clan’s central territory.”

Her lightly painted lips formed a slow smile. While Houshun sat there speechless, Reirin gracefully picked up a lacquered box she’d placed on a corner of the table.

“I have the deed right here. We have no desire to drive the local residents from their homes, so it states that all the buildings and inhabitants are to remain exactly where and as they are.”

Keigetsu had assumed the box contained an incense set, but it turned out to be for storing letters. Lifting the lid revealed the deed for Ryuu-un inside—the contract exchanged when a piece of land changed hands.

“In other words,” Reirin went on, “Lord Rinki will continue his stay on Kou soil.”

Yes, the aforementioned “distant frontier” where Rinki lay low was in fact Ryuu-un.

Unlike the other four clans—whose territories were fixed to the east, west, south, or north—the Kou clan had inherited the territory under the direct control of the imperial family at the time of the kingdom’s founding. This included the areas adjacent to the imperial capital, as well as a few far-flung pieces of land scattered all over the kingdom. The idea was that Ryuu-un, previously located in the Ran clan’s eastern territory, had become another one of those enclaves.

“What a capricious acquisition. I can’t imagine why you’d want one of the most rural areas in all of the eastern territory, a land so far removed from the capital.”

“You think so? It’s a long way from the imperial capital at a glance, but its narrow inland canal makes the trip by boat an expeditious one. Though it may be impossible to procure strategic goods, exchanging letters would be a simple matter,” Reirin pointed out.

Keigetsu was shocked. Ran Rinki hadn’t planned on keeping his head down at all. Neither had Houshun, for that matter.

Reirin turned to the flabbergasted Houshun and held out the box. “I had a lot of fun on the trip, so I recounted all the good memories to the empress and begged her to grant me a retreat of my very own. When Her Majesty later shared my stories with the Virtuous Consort, she found them so fascinating that she graciously offered us a land with a stunning view.”

In other words, once Reirin told the empress the truth of the incident, she'd extorted the Virtuous Consort for her land.

Houshun was engaging in her usual habit of hiding the bottom half of her face with her sleeves. It was a gesture that made her look timid, perhaps even bashful, but only now did it occur to Keigetsu that it had the added bonus of hiding her expression from view.

Just what sort of face was Ran Houshun making behind those sleeves?

"Say, Lady Houshun." Reirin tilted her head to one side, then said in an alluringly sweet voice, "You truly do resemble a squirrel. Despite their adorable looks, they're quick to run, ferocious, and can slaughter animals several times their own size. They're pests known to gnaw at support beams and cause houses to tilt, or to dig up the fields and ruin the crops."

It was a deeply antagonistic statement—nothing like the way most people would describe a small animal.

Casting Reirin a sidelong glance, Keigetsu broke into a cold sweat. It dawned on her that this must have been the "smile she gets with the aphids" that Leelee occasionally mentioned.

"Yet, much like the rat that rode to the banquet on the ox's back, they always hide in the shadow of bigger animals, so no one ever thinks to exterminate them."

"..."

"During the pre-celebration, you were the one steering the conversation. You stalled my brother Keishou when the situation called for it, and you manipulated popular opinion at the tea party. You always adapted your approach to suit the occasion. Not on Lord Rinki's orders, but immediately and proactively." Reirin looked Houshun straight in the eyes. "Unran—the village chief—told me Lord Rinki had a master he was taking orders from. That's you, isn't it?"

Houshun didn't answer, her head hanging low. Yet her silence was an answer in itself.

Keigetsu gulped. Beside her, Reirin slowly spread her arms toward Houshun.

“I was thinking about you the entire time I was confined to the Palace of the Golden Qilin. What could I do to render you powerless? What things would you hate, what would cause you the most pain, and what would make you angriest?” Her snow-white fingertips reached out to brush Houshun’s face, still hidden behind her sleeves. “Here is what I came up with: You are a conceited and arrogant person. You’re the type who gets most upset when ridiculed or when there’s a disruption in your plans. Thus, I’ve decided that every time you make me mad, I’m going to make you mad in turn.”

Reirin grabbed the other girl’s chin and forced her to lift her face, then peered deep into her eyes. “I will demolish your plans and steal your land. And then...” The next words practically fell from her lovely lips. “I’ll tell everyone it was because *you* did something you shouldn’t have—and make Ran Houshun go down as the most foolish Maiden in history.”

Forced to meet her gaze, Houshun stared quietly back at Reirin. Eventually, there came a murmur from the young girl’s throat.

“That would be awful.” A pause. “That would be the absolute pits!”

What began as a quiet giggle soon turned into a chuckle, until finally, Houshun’s face contorted in a fit of laughter.

“Jeez, this is the worst!” Smacking Reirin’s hand away, she threw herself back into her chair with a thud. “Like cleaning up my stupid brother’s mess hasn’t given me enough to do. I didn’t expect you to go after Aunt Hourin while I was distracted.”

Scowling, she raked a hand through her hair, flower-shaped pin and all.

Keigetsu’s jaw dropped upon hearing Houshun speak in a way that could almost be described as vulgar. “Who *is* this girl?”

“My. I see my assessment that ‘Lady Houshun seems like the reticent sort, but once you get to know each other, she’ll change’ was spot on.”

Reirin’s comment was so blithe that Keigetsu couldn’t help but exclaim, “This goes beyond the level of ‘change’! Don’t look so proud of yourself!”

“Can it,” Houshun interjected without missing a beat, heaving an aggrieved sigh. “Your shrieks are really hard on the ears, Lady Keigetsu. Could you please



not shout so loud? Keep your vulgar mouth shut. In fact, don't even breathe."

"Wha... What?! Did you just tell me to die?!" Keigetsu yelled back, her face bright red.

Houshun shoved her chin into the palm of her hand. "Well, how else would you interpret it?" Not even bothering to hide her ennui, she glanced up at Reirin. "So? I take it you're all smug 'cause you threatened Aunt Hourin and took my land? What exactly do you want from me, Miss Reirin?"

She was still using honorifics, and she wasn't outright swearing. Even so, the impudence that permeated her face and voice was downright venomous.

*This is the real Ran Houshun!*

Keigetsu was bewildered, whereas Reirin remained calm.

"An explanation," Reirin said, reaching a finger into the box and tracing its rim in a suggestive manner. "The Virtuous Consort was apparently quite flustered when Her Majesty broached the subject. She didn't argue her case, nor did she act surprised. She was quick to hand over her land and start begging for forgiveness. It seemed almost like something was weighing on her conscience. In other words, Consort Ran was in on the plot."

"..."

"A consort *would* have an easier time procuring an expensive tassel or having a sick gown made in secret than a Maiden. Was the Virtuous Consort the true mastermind, then? Still, she seemed a bit too vulnerable for that to be the case. Particularly in comparison to you."

It was a roundabout way of saying that Virtuous Consort Ran was much easier to handle, as well as more foolish, than Houshun.

Picking up on the implication, Houshun gave a derisive snort, her chin still resting in her palm. "I'll bet. Aunt Hourin's a moron."

"I want to know the truth. Who was involved in this incident, to what extent, and how?"

"If I say that Aunt Hourin thought it all up, will you go easier on me?"

"If you claim that you left all the thinking to the Virtuous Consort, that makes

you even less intelligent than her,” said Reirin mildly.

Houshun’s eyebrows shot up in a playful manner. “Now there’s a taunt if I ever heard one!” Lifting her chin from her palm, she leaned back against her chair again. “Where should I begin?” she pondered aloud, this time grabbing a lock of her own hair and examining the ends. “It all began with Her Majesty’s anecdote. The one she told us during the tea party held in your honor.”

“The what?”

“Right, of course you wouldn’t know, since we were checking in on *you* and all. It was the story about how His Majesty fell ill on a trip, and Her Majesty, who was all but confirmed to be the future Worthy Consort, climbed the ranks in a single bound after she nursed him back to health.” Houshun managed to sound both blunt and malicious at the same time. “That gave my simple-minded aunt an idea: She’d reenact the events of twenty years ago by planting a sick gown at our destination. But this time, the role of the one who rises through the ranks through caregiving would be played by yours truly.”

Giggling, she dropped the strand of hair she’d been fiddling with. “Can you even *imagine* how I felt when she called me over, oh-so-pleased with herself, the second the venue was decided? She fancies herself this big schemer despite having rocks for brains, and then she drops, ‘Say, Houshun, how about I salvage your lackluster showing by lending you a hand with the upcoming Harvest Festival?’”

Virtuous Consort Ran had gleefully told Houshun thus: The Harvest Festival was going to be held in the southern territory. Shu Keigetsu would be putting on a performance as the hostess, and those abominable Kins would be sure to provide the most eye-catching element of the rite. Therefore, she was going to hatch a scheme. She’d plant the source of a foul disease and leave Shu Keigetsu to fall victim to the blight. That would deal the finishing blow to the weakened Shu Palace. Then Houshun would step up to nurse her back to health. She’d take the spotlight as the kindhearted and intelligent Maiden who saved the girl forsaken by all.

*“You’re mediocre at dancing and embroidery, and you don’t have a knack for scheming like me, so what other role could you hope to shine in?”*

With a laugh, Consort Ran had told her to milk her harmless appearance for all it was worth and act the part of the virtuous little girl. It wouldn't matter if someone found out about the sick gown. If that happened, they could just foist the blame onto the Kin clan. To ensure things went smoothly, she'd assign the shrewd Rinki to be Houshun's ceremonial officer. Oh, how it filled her with mirth just to imagine that haughty Consort Kin ruined by false accusations...

"I was like, 'What are you, stupid?' Seriously." Heaving a deep sigh, Houshun gazed idly up at the pavilion ceiling. "The garment worn during the main rite of the Harvest Festival? She wanted to turn *that* into a sick robe? His Highness and the Maiden are supposed to stand next to each other during the ceremony. They might even touch. What was she planning to do if His Highness got infected? Nobody cares if an outcast like Lady Keigetsu dies, but if the *prince* were exposed to the illness, on the off chance it came to light that it was our doing, that would be considered the same as treason."

Houshun abruptly sat straight up and added, "Besides, I'm not going anywhere *near* someone else's poop or vomit."

Reirin, who had been listening quietly to her explanation to that point, blinked in surprise.

*That's her issue?*

Somehow, it almost sounded like that was her biggest motive in all of this. It was quite the novel reasoning to Reirin, who wasn't the least bit bothered by taking care of the sick. To each their own.

In any event, Houshun had deemed it unwise to get on board with her aunt's plan. She had immediately reached out to Rinki, who had likewise been pulled into the operation. The slender gentleman was a favorite of the Virtuous Consort's, but the man himself much preferred his sister to the foolish old woman. It was in the Rans' nature to be drawn to intellect. Soon, the pair began to hatch their own scheme, pretending to go along with the consort's plot all the while.

"I didn't want His Highness getting infected, so I went ahead and slung mud over the sick gown. No one would think to wear it after that, right? Still, I thought Aunt Hourin had the right idea about taking the opportunity to ruin

Lady Keigetsu once and for all, so I figured I'd get the job done through different methods."

"Wouldn't the humane thing have been to leave things at that?" Reirin murmured before she could stop herself.

"Why?" Houshun flicked a chess piece lying on one end of the table. "If there's a piece so vulnerable that it's on death's door, why wouldn't you take it?"

She saw people not as fellow human beings but as mere pieces to be moved atop a board. That was the biggest takeaway from her response.

"I decided to wreck Lady Keigetsu my way. In the end, the worst thing that can happen to a Maiden isn't peeing herself, it's losing her chastity." Houshun turned to Keigetsu, a smile in her innocent eyes. "So I had my brother blackmail Lord Koh into hiring the untouchables to kidnap her."

"Wha..."

"While I was at it, I got the untouchables to bring the sick gown back to the village and spread the illness. That way, I could have them silenced and kill two birds with one stone. What do I care if Lady Keigetsu and the untouchables suffer from some disease, as long as they do it somewhere far away from me?"

The way she pressed her hands together and tilted her head ever so slightly to one side was the epitome of adorable.

Keigetsu stood up, her voice and fists trembling. "You...monster..."

Houshun likewise pushed down on the table and rose to her feet, peering up at the other girl with her best puppy-dog eyes. "Am I? All I did was present people with options. *You're* the ones who chose for all that to happen."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, right? If Lord Koh actually had a clean record, we couldn't have taken advantage of him. If you were a good Maiden beloved by your subjects, you wouldn't have been kidnapped. If that old untouchable hadn't been so greedy, she wouldn't have stolen a mud-covered robe with so little prompting."

When Keigetsu went speechless, Houshun flashed her an almost bewitching

smile. “But that’s not what happened, now is it? Lord Koh chose to conceal his crime over coming clean. The villagers chose revenge over restraint. The old lady stooped to theft of her own free will. If she hadn’t, the whole story would have ended with nothing but a soiled robe. It’s their own fault for giving in to the temptation. Am I wrong?”

“Lady Houshun.” Reirin spoke up in place of Keigetsu, who had been completely overwhelmed. She plucked the box from the table and gracefully stood. Then she reverently took the letter from inside, going so far as to wrap it in a handkerchief, and held it out to Houshun. “You can have this deed.”

“What did you just say, Kou Reirin?”

Heedless of how Keigetsu was boggling at her, Reirin gave Houshun a strained smile. “How to put this...? Nothing you’ve been saying makes the least bit of sense to me. If I may be blunt, ah, I’m a bit nauseated...or rather, I find the mere thought of your brother residing on Kou territory revolting.”

“Wow, that *was* blunt, Miss Reirin,” Houshun remarked, appalled. It didn’t take long for her face to light back up, however, and she reached for the document. “Well, if you’re giving it to me, I’ll take it.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention something,” Reirin said. “The ink used to write that deed was ground with a very special kind of water—muddy water infused with a sick gown.”

“Huh?!” Houshun immediately let go of the deed.

“The scent of incense is so thick in the pavilion that it’s hard to tell, but if you take a good whiff of the ink, you should be able to smell something akin to compost. Or would you rather check the handkerchief instead? Here.”

“No...”

Houshun twisted away as Reirin brought the handkerchief closer.

*Crack!*

Her flailing hand hit the incense burner on the table. The delicate porcelain fell to the ground with a violent crash, smashing right on top of the document she’d dropped.

“Oh dear.” Reirin gingerly crouched down and blew on the coals that had spilled from the burner. Flames spread as the coals caught the breeze, quietly engulfing the deed. “It seems the deed has caught fire. That’s a shame, considering there was a clause that whoever damages the document must pay a thousand tael in gold as compensation.”

“Wha...”

“But I suppose you *did* let go of the document and drop the incense burner of your own accord, and whoever gives in to the temptation is at fault, so it is what it is.” Reirin plucked the deed from the ground as it slowly turned to ash, then stood back up. “Isn’t that what you were saying earlier, Lady Houshun? You don’t have to tell someone you’ve contaminated an item with disease, or that taking it would be detrimental to them. The responsibility falls on them simply because they’re the one who took action.”

Ashes crumbled from the parts of the document that had been swallowed in flame. The moment the last remaining corner burned away to nothing, Reirin let it go.

“Oh no. Now the Ran clan will never reclaim Ryuu-un. And it’s all your fault, Lady Houshun.”

A grinding sound leaked from behind Houshun’s lips.

While the girl gnashed her molars, Reirin took another step toward her and whispered in the sweetest of voices, “I despise you, Lady Houshun.”

Houshun’s head snapped up. It wasn’t out of fear so much as shock at the bluntness of the assertion. Reirin couldn’t blame her. Even *she* hadn’t expected to see the day when she’d bear such intense hostility toward another person.

*The fires of my heart are raging out of control.*

She was feeling such intense emotions: Anger at seeing people she cared about hurt. Frustration with herself for having allowed it to happen. Surprise and repugnance at motives she couldn’t wrap her head around.

The tranquil and blurry world she lived in had been illuminated in a strong light, its contours coming into sharp focus. She had people to protect and people she couldn’t abide. Those once nebulous categories had been divided

into two extremes.

Reirin considered Houshun her enemy.

“It’s true that your actions are passive and leave things to chance, so it would be difficult to charge you with a crime under the law. In that case, I will crush you on my own terms. Whether that means going against the order of things or acting on my emotions, I’ll be sure to see it done.”

“Gosh, how frightening...” Houshun hid her eyes behind her sleeves, as if to escape Reirin’s point-blank stare. “Who would have expected His Highness’s upstanding ‘butterfly’ to say something like that?”

“Hee hee. Upstanding? Surely you jest.” Her mouth curving into a smile, Reirin pushed aside Houshun’s sleeves and forced her to lift her gaze. “Inept as I still am, I’m a villainess.”









“A villainess...” Bit by bit, delight overtook Houshun’s features. Before long, she had erupted in giggles. “You’re the best, Miss Reirin!”

Reirin furrowed her brow at the abrupt change in attitude. “Pardon?”

Covering her mouth in delight, Houshun tilted her head to one side. “You’re such an enigma. You’re perfect in all respects, and your conduct is beyond reproach. Just when I’d taken you for some dull goody-two-shoes... These days, you get so emotional it’s like you’ve become a different person.”

Keigetsu quietly gulped when she said that last part.

Houshun didn’t seem to notice, too busy staring intently at Reirin. “You surprised me during the tea party. When you rushed to the village, and just now too. You’re tranquil yet fierce, composed yet emotional. My impression of you changes each time we talk... Which one is the real you?”

Her large, round eyes were alight with curiosity. At her core was the inquisitive mind peculiar to the Ran clan, who prided themselves on their smarts. They despised mediocrity and respected intelligence. They enjoyed playing with riddles, delighted in challenges, and loved herding the unknown into neat little cages called “comprehension.”

“You were right, Miss Reirin. I do hate having my plans disrupted or being lumped in with stupid people. But there’s one more thing I can’t stand, and that’s being surrounded by idiots and spending my days bored,” Houshun said unapologetically and without missing a beat. “I’m sick of being under my dumb aunt’s patronage, so I was thinking it’s about time I either got her kicked out or I resigned from the Maiden Court myself...but I’ve changed my mind.” The Ran Maiden pressed both hands to her chest, the very picture of innocence. “I’ve taken a liking to you, Miss Reirin.”

“Huh?”

Reirin recoiled in disgust, but Houshun simply brushed that aside with a smile. “What do you mean, ‘huh’? You look like a rice farmer who found a planthopper on his crops. Aren’t Kous supposed to love being idolized by younger people?” Her face fell in regret upon glancing at the cinders lying on the floor, but she was quick to shrug it off. “It’s a shame to have Ryuu-un taken

from me, but I'll just consider it the expensive cost of a lesson learned. If you're willing to play with me, I bet even these tedious games of vying for favor in the Maiden Court could turn out to be fun."

Just then, a court lady holding a tray of snacks approached from outside the pavilion. It was Houshun's indigo blue attendant. "I apologize for the wait," she said. "I've brought the flower cakes, Lady Houshun."

"Oh! Thank you very much." Houshun glanced over her shoulder like a small animal, immediately switching back to her usual timid way of speaking. "I'm afraid I knocked over Miss Reirin's incense burner... We can do without the sweets, so would you mind calling someone to clean this up?"

"Oh no! I'm so sorry, Lady Reirin, Lady Keigetsu." The court lady blanched and hurriedly apologized to the other girls, but she didn't scold Houshun. "Are you hurt, Lady Houshun?! Oh dear, your skirt is stained with ash... Let's get you changed at once."

"I'm sorry for the trouble... I need to apologize to Lady Reirin and Lady Keigetsu first, though."

"Of course. We'll send a formal gift of apology to the Kou Palace and the Shu Palace. But we can't have you sticking around and cutting your finger on a shard either," said the woman, panic written all over her face. She put a hand to Houshun's back and ushered her out of the pavilion like a doting mother protecting her child.

Houshun turned around and bowed deeply to Reirin and Keigetsu, saying, "Please excuse me." Flashing them her cutest look, she added, "Do forgive me for the mess...and I look forward to seeing you again soon."

Then she left the pavilion with graceful steps.

Once her small back had disappeared from sight, Reirin let a long breath go. "She's a troubled girl, isn't she?"

"I think that's too mild a word to describe *that!*" yelled Keigetsu, who had been too overwhelmed by their exchange to comment earlier. "What was that?! She's totally bankrupt in the personality department! She's out of her mind!"

“True... I was shocked to discover there are anomalies like her out there.”

“Uh, I’m not sure you have room to talk.”

“Huh?” Reirin was surprised to have the script flipped on her upon expressing her emphatic agreement.

Seeing her friend shoot her a hurt look, Keigetsu awkwardly wrinkled her nose. “Well, Ran Houshun is wicked and dangerous, but you’re more like a boar with a heart of gold. You’re a hundred times better than her. No need to worry on that front.”

“That’s not very reassuring...” mumbled Reirin. She scrunched her brow, conflicted. “It sounds like that ‘wicked and dangerous’ girl has taken a liking to me.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Good question.” For once, Reirin was at a loss. “I’ve stolen her land and issued her a warning, so I’ll leave things at that for the time being. I doubt she’ll be tempted to toy with anyone else after this.”

To Houshun, bringing people to ruin was a game. She’d meddle in people’s lives because she was bored, and she’d take someone down just because she could if she saw an opening. Now that she’d deemed Reirin “interesting,” her target would likely be restricted to the Kou Maiden from now on—unfortunately for her. If nothing else, however, that was preferable to having her mess with someone else Reirin cared about.

“Well...there’s nothing I can do but my best.” Crouching down and gathering up the shards of the incense burner scattered over the floor, Reirin came to the conclusion one would expect of a Kou, those who tried to solve everything with hard work and perseverance. “If I’m going to take on a twisted girl, I suppose I’ll have to hone my own skills as a villainess.”

Keigetsu, meanwhile, folded her arms with an exasperated look. “What ‘skills’ is a villainess supposed to have?”

“Well, I don’t have any specific goals in mind myself, but...perhaps something like upending a castle or bringing people to heel with a flick of my pinky?”

“Do you mean that literally?” Keigetsu asked, picking apart her vague answer.

Just then, there came a voice from beyond the pavilion. “We’re back!”

Arriving on the scene a little later than the indigo blue were Tousetsu and Leelee.

“Oh, that took you two a whi—”

Before she could finish that sentence, Reirin discovered the reason they’d made it back so much later than the Ran court lady. In lieu of snacks or tea, Tousetsu and Leelee had brought a few other people with them.

To the east, Gyoumei stepped out from behind Tousetsu. “Reirin! Today is only the seventh day since our return. You’re still supposed to be resting. Why are you out in the courtyard?”

“As you can see, we’re in the presence of His Highness, Lady Reirin. Please consider keeping your retaliation civil.”

To the west, Shin-u came up along Leelee with a stern look on his face. “Don’t be rash. You know the law.”

“Um, I decided to bring a professional in case this came to blows!” Leelee said quickly.

“Come now, Lady Keigetsu. In situations like these, you’ve got to grab Reirin by the arms and hold her back, if that’s what it takes.”

“Ha ha ha, don’t get too heated, Reirin! Just this morning, we got a letter from Unran begging you not to start a fight over the village!”

What’s more, Reirin’s brothers had shown up on their way to make a courtesy call to Empress Kenshuu. Keishou affably asked Keigetsu for the impossible, while Keikou had a dove perched on his shoulder.

Reirin frowned in dismay as the men emerging from all corners, along with her most trusted court ladies, came together to tell her, *Calm down! Don’t be hasty! Keep a cool head about it!*

“You don’t have to treat me like some kind of ogre or wild beast...”

She’d never felt comfortable being called a butterfly, but being treated like a

monster or a boar wasn't exactly ideal either.

While Reirin put a hand to her cheek, Keigetsu pulled a haggard face beside her. "You haven't even flicked your pinky and you've already brought everyone to heel. That's a villainess for you," she grumbled.

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"You're in a good mood, Your Majesty," remarked the gamboge gold who was grinding an ink stick beside her desk.

The woman in question looked up. "Does it seem that way?"

Smiling gently, the elderly court lady pointed to the document spread out over the desk. "Yes. Your handwriting has more of a flourish to it than usual."

Kenshuu was in the process of adding a certain clause to the deed. The Virtuous Consort had written that she ceded the land of Ryuu-un and all its inhabitants, and she was adding a line to the effect that anyone who damaged the document would be forced to pay a compensation fee.

"Well, it was a request from my precious niece. Of course I'd get into it."

The empress smiled, her brush gliding across the inkstone. Reirin didn't like to rely on her guardian's authority, so this was the first time the girl had ever asked her for anything. As an aunt who loved to dote on her niece, Kenshuu had to put her all into granting her wish. She'd ordered first-rate brushes and paper for the task, and she'd even gone to the trouble of having the clear waters of the river drawn to grind the ink.

"Heh heh. I wonder what she's planning to do with this added clause."

If you excluded the large fine, it was a perfectly ordinary contract. Hence, Consort Ran had agreed to tacking on the extra clause...but to what end was Reirin having her write it?

Thinking back to the look on her niece's face as she'd asked her to go through the Virtuous Consort to take the Rans' land, Kenshuu broke into a smile. "Scary stuff."

She'd heard all about what happened on the trip. It was a tumultuous enough event to make even the dauntless Kenshuu think, *Oh, wow*, but the experience

seemed to have provided Reirin a good deal of mental stimulation.

The girl had learned to despair, to rage, to hate someone, and to seek revenge. From the perspective of conventional morality, she was headed down a wicked path—but Kenshuu was happy to see it.

*Someone without anger or a thirst for vengeance is like a beast without fangs.*

Anger existed to protect oneself and their loved ones. It wasn't good to be consumed by hatred, but neither could one shirk from hating their enemies. Helpless, harmless, virtuous, and delicate were all fine traits to have in a pet, but Kenshuu wanted to see her niece live as a person—a human being with a firm sense of self.

“It’s getting harder and harder to take my eyes off you.”

It was like watching a paper doll that had been nothing but a pretty sight come to life and turn into a flesh-and-blood human being. Her beauty came from learning to feel piteous despair and scathing rage alongside her serene smiles.

“She’s becoming more and more like you, Seishuu.”

Kenshuu finished the last stroke, then glanced at the display shelf attached to the wall. It was filled with sachets, letters, and embroidered handkerchiefs made by Reirin. There wasn't much else in the room, so those shelves provided the sole splash of intricate color.

“Your daughter is the greatest,” she murmured in the direction of the shelves. Dropping her gaze, she added in an even quieter voice, “And the worst too.”

Her words were easily drowned out by the clang of her brush as she cast it aside.

Having missed what her mistress said, the gamboge gold leaned forward in a fluster. “Pardon me, Your Majesty. What did you say?”

“Nothing,” Kenshuu replied with a faint smile. “I didn’t say anything. All right, I’m done with this deed. Go ahead and deliver it to Reirin.”

She waved the document in the wind and handed it off to her court lady. Watching out of the corner of her eye as her attendant went down on her

knees and accepted it, Kenshuu stretched and headed over to the window. Outside, autumn flowers swayed gently in the wind. The gardens were meticulously tended so as not to spoil their well-calculated beauty, so there wasn't a single vermin or pest to be found. It was a lonely sight for a lover of animals and insects like Kenshuu.

*Well, there's no shortage of vermin and creepy-crawlies in the inner court, so I'm not wanting for excitement.*

She impolitely stuck her elbow on the windowsill and shoved her chin in her palm. As she felt the gentle breeze on her cheeks, her thoughts drifted to the girl she'd once appraised as a "squirrel," Ran Houshun.

*It sounds like she really cut loose. The Virtuous Consort is bound to catch on to her scheming nature soon.*

Up to this point, the Virtuous Consort had taken Ran Houshun for a reticent, useless Maiden, but considering how much the girl had acted on her own initiative, she was due for a change in her perception. For her part, it seemed Houshun looked down on the consort as "her shortsighted aunt," but Hourin was yet another woman who had held strong and survived life in the inner court. It was better not to underestimate one who had built her strength and viciousness with age.

*Ran Houshun has turned out to be a hidden egotist, and Kin Seika openly displays her disdain for the Pure Consort... Good grief, we have a lot of feisty Maidens this generation.*

Kenshuu didn't hold it against the rookie Maidens for mocking their consorts. The fact of the matter was that Virtuous Consort Ran *was* shortsighted, and Pure Consort Kin *was* vulgar. Still, from the consorts' point of view, having the Maidens—who were nothing but their own protégés—looking down on them wasn't an acceptable state of affairs. If the Maidens got too cocky, there was a good chance their consorts would decide to teach them the "proper order" soon.

*I hope it doesn't come back to bite them,* thought Kenshuu as she gazed idly upon the gardens.

"Your Majesty. If you have time to enjoy the breeze, I'm afraid I must ask you



to have a look at these documents. We need to decide on the tasks for the Rite of Reverence soon,” said a gamboge gold who had shown up in place of the one who left with the deed, cradling a large number of scrolls.

Dragged back to reality by the pile of work mercilessly dumped on her desk, Kenshuu scowled. “The tasks for the Rite of Reverence? Didn’t I put together a draft the other day?”

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but ‘a martial arts tournament, drinking contest, waterfall meditation session, thousand-sutra transcription, and triple all-nighter farming extravaganza’ have no place in this rite. This ritual is a midterm examination of the girls’ Maidenly qualities, if you’ll recall,” the gamboge gold responded curtly, long accustomed to handling Kenshuu.

“Why not? I bet Reirin would tackle them all with stars in her eyes. You ladies would enjoy spectating it too.”

“Anything we find intriguing would seem outrageous to the other clans. The other consorts would put their foot down over a Rite of Reverence like that.”

There was the good sense of a high-ranking court lady at work. In the first place, Kenshuu hadn’t thought that half joke of a draft would make it through the approval process, so she resigned herself to reworking the tasks.

“Cut me some slack. I thought it’d be boring to go with the usual song and dance competitions.”

“Putting an interesting spin on those will be a chance to show your skills. Roll up your sleeves and think of something that fits the theme.”

“Sure, I hear you,” Kenshuu said in a grumble unbecoming of the empress, then returned to the table.

Casting one last longing glance toward the window, she squinted into the cool breeze blowing in from the gardens.

“There’s a storm brewing.”

The autumn flowers swayed gently in the soft sunlight.

Yet beyond the stillness, she could sense a storm creeping in.

## Bonus Story: A Smile and a Prophecy

**K**OU REIRIN was the treasure of the Kou clan.

It was said that she was so adored by the young and old alike that none wanted to let her out of their grasp. In particular, rumor had it that Reirin's father and brothers had showered her with affection from the moment she came into the world, helpless smiles spreading across their faces at the mere sight of her—but at least in Keishou's case, that wasn't true.

The reason being that Kou Keishou, the second son of the Kou clan and Reirin's older brother, had hated her until he was ten years old.

On the day of his tenth birthday, Keishou was gazing sullenly at the sky through the window of his room. It was a dazzling blue, as though last night's rain had washed it to a shine. If things had gone right, this was around the time he would have been enjoying a banquet attended by his friends and relatives, beneath skies so clear it was like nature itself was celebrating his birth.

*If* things had gone right.

That is, if his sister hadn't gotten sick from the long rain and been laid up in bed.

"What's her problem?" Keishou grumbled in a small voice that had yet to break, his chin resting in his palm. "Seriously, what is *wrong* with her?"

He never said things like "I'm pissed!" or "That little brat." He'd been taught that it was wrong to hurl that sort of verbal abuse, and he preferred not to stray from being a good boy. For a long time, he'd prided himself on being the obedient, rational little brother to his violent and shortsighted elder brother. Esteemed as unusually intellectual for a male Kou, Keishou was reserved, listened to what people told him, always kept a smile on his face, and was the darling of his clan.

Or he *had* been, until Reirin was born.

His little sister, who possessed the delicate beauty and ephemeral quality of a dusting of snow that melted at one's touch, had captivated the hearts of every Kou except Keishou from the moment she gave her feeble first cry. The fact that her mother had passed away right after she was born made her all the more pitiful.

The mere act of her breathing had people dabbing at their eyes, thinking it to be a miracle. Each time her face drooped, they rushed to her side, and each time she smiled, they were intoxicated with ecstasy.

The Kou clan were a family of natural-born caretakers. Though they loved nurturing others above all else—no, *because* of that—they didn't care to be on the receiving end, and they were always looking for a target for their affections. Since everyone had more desire to pamper and cherish than they knew what to do with, it was only natural they'd want to dote on the girl as helpless and innocent as a newborn kitten dropped at their doorstep. Even Keishou, who had lost his status as the youngest child to her, had to admire how precious she was whenever he was in her company. There was just something about her that triggered the protective instincts.

Still, if you asked him whether he could love his sister even after she'd stolen all the praise, warm looks, small gifts, and preferential treatment that used to be his, the answer was no. Particularly not today, considering the banquet postponed on her account had been to celebrate the important milestone of his tenth birthday. Under normal circumstances, Keishou would have been dressed in the finest of clothes tailored by his mother, and his father would have presented him with gifts suited to his talents, such as a sword or a brush.

From the day Reirin was born, there had been a sharp decrease in the number of events Keishou got to monopolize. Since he wanted to play the part of a good brother, he'd always pretended not to mind in front of other people, but the truth was that he'd been really, really looking forward to this day.

"And the weather turned out so nice too. It's a shame."

Just then, he heard a disappointed voice from outside the window, somewhere just past the thick plantings. Judging by the pitch of the voice, it

was a boy about the same age as himself. There were a couple of other people with him, and the group seemed to be taking a stroll through the gardens.

“I can’t believe we traveled all this way to the main estate, only to have the banquet we came here for postponed.”

“Still, I can understand why they’d put Lady Reirin’s health first. I’d feel bad for her if she was coughing all alone while the rest of us were off enjoying a party. Right, Shikyou?”

“Yeah. Just think of it as an excuse to come back to the main estate another time. It’ll give us the chance to see Lady Reirin again too.”

He couldn’t see their faces through the bushes, but based on the names mentioned and the context of the conversation, Keishou assumed they were boys from a branch family. Since they lived a good distance away, they’d gone out of their way to stay at the main estate for several days in advance of the birthday banquet. For a fleeting moment, he’d felt bad that they’d come all this way only to be denied the main event, but it didn’t take him long to grow miffed that they’d all been so quick to accept the outcome and stick up for Reirin.

Though he wasn’t the heir, Keishou was a son of the main line. How could they care more about some sickly girl than the postponement of his tenth birthday?

“Nothing gives me the warm fuzzies quite like seeing Lady Reirin’s smile. Keeping her happy definitely takes priority over attending some stiff banquet.”

The blithe remark drew a scowl from Keishou. It was true that Reirin always had a smile on her face, but he’d never felt the “warm fuzzies” over that. She always smiled without a care in the world, whether she’d messed up plans with her ailing health or Keishou had just taken a shot at her. If anything, it made him think she was slow on the uptake.

If she thought smiling could fix all her problems, he couldn’t imagine anything lazier and more arrogant. Like most of the Kou clan, Keishou disliked deception and loved hard work and sincerity.

“Besides...”

The next comment turned Keishou pale far faster than any comment about Reirin's smile.

"To be honest...the banquet might be better off canceled. I mean, I'd feel bad for Lord Keishou compared to Lord Keikou," one boy said in a hushed voice, and the other two piped up in agreement.

"Good point. Their mother was still alive for Lord Keikou's birthday, so she even put on a dance for us. It was so beautiful. I was only five at the time, but I remember it like it was yesterday."

"Plus, she lived up to her reputation as a master embroiderer and sewed him a really lavish robe. She even gave us embroidered sachets as a favor. I still have mine on display."

The boys exchanged a round of nods, then said in unison, "But she's not around anymore."

Taking his chin out of his palm, Keishou clenched his hands into fists. Even after the boys—who were oblivious to his presence beyond the bushes—had wandered elsewhere, he just sat there for some time, his shoulders trembling.

His mother, who had been extolled as the greatest dancer of her generation and a master embroiderer, was gone. She'd lost her life giving birth to Reirin.

"Excuse me..."

It was then that the door behind him creaked opened, accompanied by a reserved greeting.

"May I have a moment, Brother Junior?"

The one who asked permission in a child's awkward tone, hesitantly stepping into the room, was Reirin.

"I want to talk."

There was a gaggle of attendants behind her, creating a striking mismatch with such a small girl. His sickly younger sister had twice the amount of attendants Keishou did on any given day. Normally, he didn't mind that, and he'd in fact find it annoying to have a huge crowd of people fussing over him. For some reason, though, even that trivial difference was nagging at him now. It

was only compounded by the way the entire group stared at him with concern from where they'd stopped outside his room.

"What is it?" Keishou asked, doing his best to affect his usual "mild-mannered and reasonable brother" voice.

Yet the more he did that, the more his anger simmered inside him.

It was her fault. It was all because of her.

The canceled banquet, the boys' disappointment, the fact that his birthday clothes were a sad sight compared to his brother's. As he swallowed down the thoughts that kept popping into his head one after another, Reirin bowed her head formally. "I'm very sorry for the trouble I've caused you, Brother Junior."

It was a good apology for a five-year-old, which put some of Keishou's irritation to rest. He wasn't so irrational as to return her courtesy with an insult.

"It's fine. I'm just glad you're doing well. Are you all better now?"

"Yes. By the Heavens' grace." When Reirin lifted her head and he saw the smile on her face, the anger he'd worked so hard to fight down flared back up again. "I'm feeling much better."

*Excuse me?*

Keishou's honest reaction began and ended there.

If she was going to get back on her feet so quickly, why couldn't she have picked a different day to pass out? Besides, how could she smile without a lick of shame? It was like she was saying, *Aren't you happy I'm doing so well?* After all the trouble she'd caused the people around her, she could have looked a little more distressed or somber.

"Hmm."

If this had been any other time, he probably could have kept a lid on his emotions.

If it hadn't been that one particular day. If he hadn't just overheard those boys' conversation.

In that moment, however, the ten-year-old Keishou felt a storm of misery,

frustration, and loneliness swirling in his chest with suffocating intensity.

“So I’d like to make it up to you.”

Why bother apologizing? She didn’t even realize how important the thing she’d destroyed had been to Keishou.

“It’s fine. I don’t need anything.”

“No, that’s no good. Please let me make it up to you. I’ll do anything.”

He grew even more irritated when she kept pushing after he’d rebuffed her.

*Make it up to me? Don’t be stupid. How do you think you can do that?*

What Keishou wanted was something she could never give him: the high expectations of the people around him. Smiles that held enough tenderness to embarrass him. A lavish banquet. Adoring glances. Gorgeous embroidery. A dance dedicated to him and him alone. And...

*“Happy birthday, Keishou. You’ve grown into such a fine man.”*

Well wishes from his mother, who surely would have been delirious with joy to see Keishou turn ten.

“...”

The heat welling up in the back of his throat shot straight past his mouth and leaked from the corners of his eyes. Keishou quickly turned his face aside. What left his mouth instead was a voice chilly enough to surprise himself. “Give me back my mom, then. She died because of you.”

In an instant, he felt the air around him crackle with tension.

“Lord Keishou—”

“Kidding.” Keishou was quick to play it off when he saw how the attendants thrust themselves toward him, their faces ashen. “You wouldn’t want me asking for something like that, right? You ought to be more careful about offering to do ‘anything,’ is my point. I’m fine. Just head back to your room.”

Even Keishou was dismayed by his own inability to keep his hostility in check. His heart pounded in his ears. He hadn’t meant to go that far. What if he’d made his sister cry?

“Very well.” After giving a deep bow, Reirin lifted her head with purpose. She was wearing the usual smile on her cherubic yet well-proportioned face.

“Please excuse me, then.”

Keishou could hear her attendants breathe a discreet sigh of relief as she turned on her heel with a smile. He felt reassured too. Well, no—if anything, he felt deflated.

*Oh, I see.*

His sister really was dense, after all. She was probably so spoiled by everyone around her that she hadn’t even considered the possibility of someone hating her. Either that, or she was just too young. That had to be the reason why she could keep such a carefree smile on her face.

*So that’s how it is...*

Keishou huffed a small sigh, and he didn’t even dwell on their conversation after the fact.

Until about ten days later, when Reirin fainted again.

Reirin’s collapse sent the entire estate into an uproar. Her fainting or getting laid up with fever was a common occurrence, but this time it was because she had stumbled in the wrong place, missed her footing on a step, and injured her arm. Apparently, it had happened while she was visiting her mother’s shrine.

If this were one of her brothers, the family would have laughed off even a broken bone and said, “Great, it’s an opportunity for it to grow back stronger!” But it was a different story when Reirin’s slender arm was the one getting hurt. Pain-relieving incense burned throughout the entire house, famous doctors and shamans had been called on the double, and the entire family had gone into the mountains to pick hematopoietic medicinal herbs.

While everyone else was running around like headless chickens, Keishou sat in a daze in his room.

*Bang!*

Then there came the tremendous slam of his door being flung open, and



someone threw himself into the room.

“Hey! Keishou!”

That someone—Keishou’s eldest brother, Keikou—got a running start before punching Keishou in the face with all his might.

“You big asshole!”

“Wha—?!”

The words “*What are you doing?!*” were muffled in a scream and lost in the sound of the blow. Keikou’s sudden assault left Keishou no chance to brace himself, and he tumbled onto the floor. He’d gotten into a handful of brawls with his rambunctious brother before, but the fist hit hard enough to make him realize Keikou had been holding back all those times. The place he’d been struck throbbed with heat, and he could feel it swelling up in the blink of an eye.

But his older brother showed not the slightest hint of sympathy for Keishou as he lay sprawled on the floor. Instead, Keikou climbed on top of him, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled his face close. “Go apologize to Reirin right now,” he growled at point-blank range.

“Huh?”

“You can never take back what’s already been said. But, at the very least, you should grovel before her and apologize for that awful, snide comment!”

His roar was loud enough to make the air in the room tremble. This was the first time Keishou had ever seen his good-natured brother so furious. At first, he was taken aback. After some thought, he realized that “that awful, snide comment” must have been referring to part of the conversation he’d had the other day, and his bewilderment gradually morphed into irritation.

“Why should I?”

“Excuse me?!”

“Why should I have to apologize? Also, that hurts. Get off me.”

He thought this was totally unreasonable. That conversation had been between him and Reirin. Keikou had no right to condemn him for it. For argument’s sake, even if Keishou *had* done something seriously wrong, he’d

understand why his older brother would rebuke him for it—but he'd written off his comment as a "joke," and Reirin herself hadn't seemed bothered by it. She'd responded with a placid smile.

As Keishou sat up, rubbing at his aching cheek, Keikou asked, "Do you have any idea how much you pushed her over the edge?"

"How much I *what*? I don't recall doing any such thing, and she doesn't have the emotional range to get like that, anyway. She's always smiling. Forget it... And c'mon, that *hurt*. It's not fair for you to—"

His rebuke was cut off by his older brother's glare, so sharp it was almost audible.

"Smile, then."

"Huh?"

"Go on. Smile, damn it!"

He didn't stop there, grabbing Keishou's swollen cheek and tugging it as hard as he could.

"Ouch! I said that hurts!"

"You ought to learn just how hard it is to keep smiling after you've taken an 'unfair' beating!"

Keishou instinctively gulped. His brother was staring him down with a stormier look than ever before.

"Do you know where Reirin collapsed, Keishou?"

"Well, sure. The shrine..."

"And what do you think she was doing there?"

"Her daily prayers, probably..."

"Wrong. She was trying to bring our mother back from the dead."

Keishou boggled at the unexpected response. "She what?"

"She's been sneaking out of her room all night to pray. She tried to write a Thousand-Character Classic. You know, something to the tune of 'Mother,

please come back for Brother Junior's sake. I beg of you.' Dozens of papers worth, every single day. Without sleep!"

When Keikou pulled a piece of paper from his breast to prove his point, Keishou was so shocked that his mind went blank. The entire sheet was crammed with sloppy, newly learned characters.

"But there's no way she'd come back to life..." He tried to force a wry grin, but he couldn't manage it.

Was she too young to tell the difference between fantasy and reality? Or was she so desperate that she'd clung to a nonexistent possibility?

"There's no way... I mean, she smiled at me..."

"If she *hadn't* smiled, her attendants would have raised a fuss and given you hell for it. The majority of her smiles are pure bravado. If she says, 'I'm doing well,' it really means, 'I'm in pain.' Yet she still smiles. Because if she doesn't, everyone else will worry about her!" Keikou continued on as Keishou fell into stunned silence. "Listen to me. Why do you think she tripped at the shrine? It was because she practiced her dancing after she prayed. That was the only place she could go to be alone. Whenever she trains, someone else tries to stop her out of concern. She practiced her embroidery in secret at the shrine too. Hey, Keishou...can you guess why?"

He connected the dots immediately, of course. His mother had been extolled as the greatest dancer of her generation and a master embroiderer.

*"Give me back my mom, then."*

Keikou looked at his silent brother with a piercing gaze. "While she was practicing her dance, Reirin tripped over one of the steps and cut her arm on a pair of scissors she'd left on the floor. That's how she got a fever. If Reirin dies over this, and I tell you, 'It's your fault, so give me back my sister,' what will you do?"

"..."

"C'mon, smile."

He'd long stopped pinching his brother's cheek, yet Keishou's face stung

harder than ever. She'd been unfairly berated and racked with guilt, yet she couldn't cry, make excuses, or take it back. She had to keep a smile on her face so as not to worry those around her.

"Then I'll respond to your smile by saying, 'If you can smile without a care in the world, you must lack emotions.'"

To make matters worse, she was then criticized for smiling.

Keikou softened his tone as he watched his little brother hang his head. "I get that you're upset and lonely, but Reirin is having an even harder time. After all, there's a stupid amount of people who love to oh-so-innocently say stuff like, 'You have to live for your mother's sake.'" Quietly, he added, "That's why, as her family, we shouldn't ever hold her responsible for our mother's death."

"I..."

Keishou started walking off before Keikou could finish his sentence.

"I'm going to go apologize!"

His feet were already carrying him out of the room. His fast walk became a trot, which eventually turned into an all-out sprint. Running down the long cloister, Keishou entered his sister's room with almost enough force to slam into the door.

"Reirin!"

"Brother Junior?!"

Her attendants must have gone off to fetch her water or a change of clothes. In a rare occurrence, Reirin was napping all alone. Her eyes, damp with fever, were a sorry sight to see.

The moment she registered that Keishou was there, she steeled her face and sat up straight in her bed. Then, as if to stop Keishou from opening his mouth, she belted, "I'm very sorry!"

It was such a heartfelt apology that it was hard to believe it came from a sick girl.

"Huh?"

“I collapsed so soon after the last time! I’ve caused you worry on top of worry! Trouble on top of trouble! I’m the worst! I wish I could find a hole to hide in!” She rattled off one thing after another, but the moment she tried to bow her head, her whole body swayed and wobbled.

Keishou offered her an arm on instinct, but she corrected her posture on her own, refusing to take it. She pressed her hands to the bed and exhaled a deep breath. By the time she lifted her face again, she had her usual prim aura about her.

When he saw that, something dawned on Keishou: *She’s trying not to show me.*

Her teetering body. Her pained face. Her tears. Her weakness.

However, it seemed she was having a hard time catching her breath right away—upon closer inspection, he noticed her flat chest heaving up and down as she gasped for air.

Even so, she smiled faintly and told Keishou, “Thanks to my training, I’ve mastered my first dance. I’m still learning to embroider, but I’m able to sew in a straight line now.” She pulled over a piece of cloth from under her pillow. The silk she held out to him had the two characters of “Keishou” stitched into the fabric. “I did my best. I promise I’ll get even better soon.”

It was shockingly intricate. The cloth wasn’t crimped at all, and the stitches were right and evenly spaced.

“It would’ve been better if I could bring Mother back to life, but it seems I don’t have a talent for magic.”

Reirin’s shoulders slumped sadly while Keishou stared at the cloth in shock. Soon enough, however, she lifted her face and clenched the fist holding the silk.

“I’ll just work harder on my dance and sewing instead. If, one day, I become even better than Mother, and I give you lots of embroidery and kind words...” She cast Keishou a hesitant look. “Will you forgive me?”

Tears spilled from Keishou’s eyes at the sight of her smile, a sign that she had embraced his unfair resentment. Now more than ever—even more than when he’d been scowled at by her attendants or punched by his brother—he deeply

regretted what he'd said.

"B-Brother Junior?! What's wrong?! Your cheek is swollen!"

"I'm..."

His throat felt hot. His nose burned. Despite being the most well-spoken person in the Kou clan, he couldn't put a word to any one of the emotions welling up inside him, instead grabbing a washbasin set out beside the bed on impulse.

"I'm so stupid!"

*Splash!*

He dumped its contents over his own head.

"Brother Junior?!"

"I'm the worst! I wish I could find a hole to hide in! I need to cool off my head too!" he yelled as he tossed the empty washbasin aside, his whole body dripping wet. "I've cooled down a bit! So...Reirin! I'm really sorry!"

He thumped down to his knees below the bed. When he pressed his forehead to the floor, Reirin rushed down from her bed in a fluster.

"Brother Junior...? What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I'm apologizing out of shame! And these aren't tears—it's water!"

"Huh? But just now, you were—"

"It's water!" he shouted desperately, droplets trickling down his face.

When Reirin reached out a hand in dismay, Keishou pulled his sister into the tightest embrace he could muster to keep her from seeing his face.

"I'm sorry, Reirin! I'm really sorry."

What should he do? He didn't need her to make anything up to him. How could he get through to his sister that she could just live and be loved without having to pay any sort of price? Was it enough to tell her that she didn't need to practice her embroidery or dance?

No, she had almost certainly been bombarded with words just like Keishou's

almost-curse by all manner of people. In that case, no matter how hard Keishou tried to stop her, there would be no stopping Reirin's earnest and excessive efforts. As intelligent as she was, she could read the selfish expectations and unfair hostility of those around her with a far greater sharpness than they realized.

*"You can never take back what's already been said."*

Keikou was exactly right. He'd said something he could never fix.

If he tried to appease her by saying that it wasn't her fault, or that she didn't have to work so hard, Reirin wouldn't believe him, and she'd never fill the void of despair in her heart.

"Brother Junior...?"

"I'm sorry, Reirin. You're...you're my precious little sister." In the end, those were the words that left Keishou's trembling lips. "You're so dear to me. I love you. You're the kindest...most hardworking, gutsiest, and most precious little sister in the world. You're amazing. No other girl could dance, write, and embroider so well at the age of five..."

Now that he'd pushed her over the edge, there was nothing Keishou could do to stop her from putting in the effort to be forgiven for her own existence. Then, if nothing else, he would honor her efforts. He would acknowledge her and reassure her.

*It's all right. You're doing great, so it's fine. You are loved, and you don't have to apologize to anyone.*

"Brother Junior..."

"I'm sorry, Reirin. I love you. You're my beloved sister. You're the most wonderful sister in the world."

Dripping water onto the floor, Keishou continued to hold his sister's feverish body close.

From that day forward, Kou Keishou became known as a "sister fanatic" to rival his brother Keikou, singing his sister's praises without the slightest bit of

shame.

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You're overzealous. You Kou men are really *so* overzealous. Don't you ever feel ashamed of constantly lionizing your own family?"

"I don't."

It was in the middle of the excursion. Shu Keigetsu—the Maiden who was trapped in his sister's body due to various circumstances—frowned at Keishou. He simply brushed her complaint aside.

"Because Reirin is, in fact, the loveliest, most beautiful, most adorable, kindest, hardest-working, most wonderful sister in the world. Unlike you."

"I'll never understand how you can have the nerve to say things like that about your own relatives," she spat, keeping an eye on the candle all the while. For some time now, she'd been on the lookout to see if she could get in touch with the "Shu Keigetsu" in the village—or rather, Reirin—using some sort of flame spell.

Around the time of their initial encounter, Keigetsu had made herself seem small around him, but she'd become less reserved the more time they spent together...or perhaps the longer she was out of contact with Reirin. Anxious and frustrated, she spent her time chewing her nails and nagging him constantly.

It was a bit novel to see his sister's face show such a range of emotion without reservation.

"If you ask me, she's getting too big for her britches. She's downright brazen. Carefree too. Why won't she respond to my flame calls? Is she stupid? Doesn't she have a sense of urgency or danger? Look at how much trouble she's making for me!"

Keigetsu had once stolen Reirin's body out of jealousy. Even now, she claimed they "hadn't hit it off just yet," and—to borrow her own words with regards to the latest switch—she was "extremely mad and annoyed" about how much she'd been inconvenienced.

Of course, from Keishou's perspective, it just looked like she was so worried



about her friend that it was making her impatient.

“You really love Reirin, hm?” he murmured with feeling.

“What makes you say that?! There’s no way I’d ever love her!” Keigetsu was quick to bear her fangs. “Listen here! If there’s any word that describes my feelings for her, it’s ‘resentment.’ Seeing her blithe, happy-go-lucky attitude strikes me with the urge to twist her cheeks off her face every now and then!”

“You know...”

*You’re a lot like me,* Keishou nearly said.

She assumed the other girl was blessed, got jealous of her, envied her, and tried to push those feelings down, only to fail in the end.

*But sooner or later, you’ll be overwhelmed to find out how sad she really is.*

From there, she’d never look back. She’d run up to her friend and reach out a hand, hoping to help her however little she could.

“‘You know’...what?”

“Nothing. I’m sure you’ll end up falling for Reirin in due time,” he declared with a smile.

Keigetsu’s face twitched with all its might. She really was an expressive girl.

“What do *you* know?” she grumbled.

“I know that much,” Keishou told her, his smile growing wider.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. Many thanks for picking up Volume 4.

Given how the third volume ended, I rushed to get the sequel out as fast as... Huh? I'm getting déjà vu here. By this point, I'm sure you've all adapted to the "two-volume arc" format and a book so jam-packed there's only one page left for the afterword. Thanks for indulging me.

Good news: Thanks to you, my generous readers, the *Inept Villainess* series will continue!

Next volume will bring the story back to the Maiden Court. The plan is to write about Reirin and Keigetsu getting into a big, friendship-ending fight that pulls in the rest of the Maidens and consorts. I think I can go ahead and give a heads-up this time: I doubt I'll wrap up the story in a single volume! Still, I hope you'll stick around all the same.

Though I'd originally planned to let this story run its course as fast as a shooting star, I'm truly grateful that your support has given me the chance to expand the cast, add chapter after chapter, and depict all the characters growing up little by little.

Thank you again for allowing me to keep on writing this series.

My heartfelt thanks to my editor, for so eagerly keeping pace with me on this journey; to Kana Yuki-sensei, for always making my heart burst with her wonderful illustrations; to my designer; and to Ei Ohitsuji-sensei, for giving me a reason to live in the form of a manga adaptation.

Let's meet again in Volume 5.

—Satsuki Nakamura, April 2022



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